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The illustration depicts a young woman with long blonde hair and green eyes, wearing a purple and white maid-style dress with a large black bow. She holds a sword. Behind her is a young man with black hair in a black and white outfit, also holding a sword. In the background, a blue armored figure is visible. A small blue blob floats near the man. The scene is set on a grassy hill under a cloudy sky.

BLACK SUMMONER

THE BOUND DEMON

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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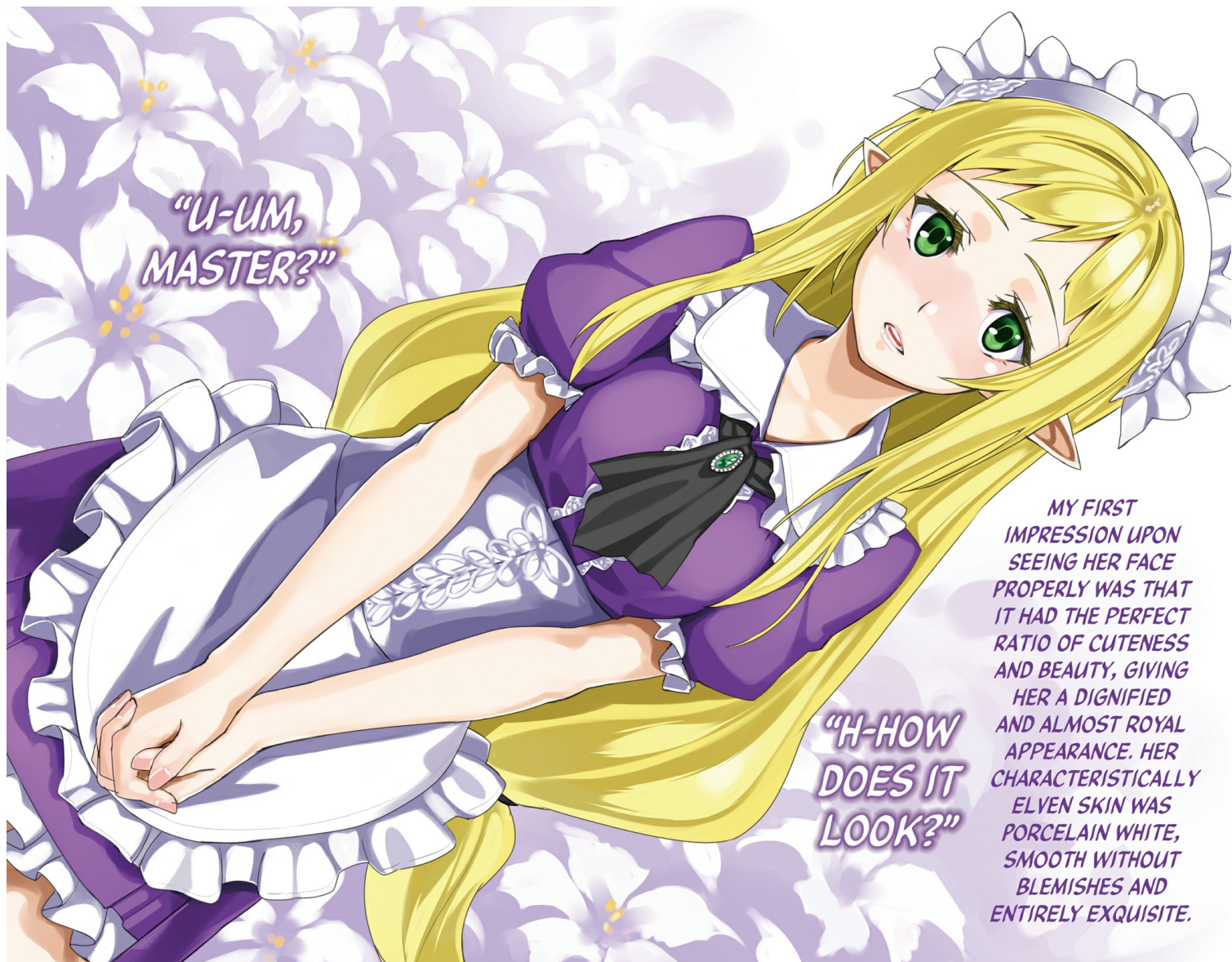
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"YES,
MY
KING!"

"YES,
MASTER!"

"GERARD,
TAKE THE
FRONT. EFIL,
PERMISSION
TO USE BLAZE
ARROW
GRANTED."



"U-UM,
MASTER?"

"H-HOW
DOES IT
LOOK?"

MY FIRST
IMPRESSION UPON
SEEING HER FACE
PROPERLY WAS THAT
IT HAD THE PERFECT
RATIO OF CUTENESS
AND BEAUTY, GIVING
HER A DIGNIFIED
AND ALMOST ROYAL
APPEARANCE. HER
CHARACTERISTICALLY
ELVEN SKIN WAS
PORCELAIN WHITE,
SMOOTH WITHOUT
BLEMISHES AND
ENTIRELY EXQUISITE.



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ILLUSTRATION: KUROGIN (DIGS)

Prologue: Summoner

When I came to, I found myself in the middle of a sea of green. It appeared to be a forest that I had no recollection of. The leaves were playing a soothing melody, but I was hardly in a state of mind to appreciate it. I hadn't the faintest idea why I was sleeping in a place like this. In fact, I couldn't even recall my own name. *Is this what they call amnesia?*

Thankfully, common sense and general knowledge still remained in my head. Although I did not remember anything about myself at all, I knew somehow that I had been born and raised in Japan, on Earth. It was a very strange sensation, as if a fog were obscuring that part of my mind.

I stood in place for a while, completely at a loss, until I noticed something blinking in front of me. I was pretty sure that it hadn't been there a moment ago.

"What is this...?"

Looking over, I realized that it was a flashing button on a translucent slab. Closer scrutiny revealed that there were actually words on the button itself:

Welcome to your new world!

It looked somewhat similar to an in-game display, more commonly called a user interface, or UI screen. For a split second, my mind froze. *A new world? Does that mean that I'm currently on a world that isn't Earth?* My thoughts were racing as the button continued to blink, but I eventually decided to press it. *At worst, I'm just being pranked right now.*

::Congratulations!::

The sudden sound of a female voice made me jump. I looked around but saw no one. It almost seemed like the voice was coming from inside my own head.

::As the result of a scrupulous and meticulous selection process, you have been granted the right to transmigrate to another world! Currently, you have no memories of your previous life, but rest assured, we received your full

consent before bringing you over. All of your knowledge from the modern world should still be intact, so no worries there!::

“What the hell was pre-transmigration me doing?!”

::This is a fantasy world where swords clash and magic abounds. You currently possess skills that you yourself chose before your transmigration. For further details, please check your screen.::



Huh, as I thought, this really does look like the UI of a video game.

Kelvin (23 y/o, Male, Human, Summoner) Level: 1

Title: None

HP: 10/10

MP: 20/20

Strength: 1

Endurance: 1

Agility: 3

Magic: 5

Luck: 4

Skills: Summoning (Rank S) [Available slots: 9], Green Magic (Rank F), Analyze Eye (Rank S), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points, Experience Sharing

I found myself thoroughly transfixed by the display, my earlier distrust gone without a trace. Clearly, I had been someone who loved gaming a lot. There was no other way to explain the excitement welling up in my chest. *Sorry for judging you just now, pre-transmigration me.*

According to the explanation on the screen, I had previously allocated a set number of skill points (SP) to spend on various skills. Since some of my skills were already at Rank S, I must have used up quite a lot of points already. *So, my class is Summoner? Reminds me of a certain famous game...*

“Guess I might as well start by reading the descriptions of my skills.”

Summoning (Rank S) The ability to take on Followers by establishing a Contract. Supplied with magic from the Summoner, Followers receive stats boosts, become telepathically linked to the Summoner, and can be Summoned anywhere within the Summoner’s magical range. A higher skill rank provides more Follower slots, greater stats boosts, and the ability to Contract with increasingly superior beings.

Green Magic (Rank F) The ability to manipulate earth and wind. Well-balanced between offense, support, and recovery. A higher skill rank offers more available spells.

Analyze Eye (Rank S) The ability to read a target's Status. A higher skill rank provides more detailed information.

Double Growth Rate

The stats increase gained from leveling up is doubled.

Double Skill Points

The number of skill points earned from leveling up is doubled.

Experience Sharing

The ability to apply earned XP to all party members. Depending on skill conditions, it is also possible to apply earned XP to Followers.

“Well, would you look at that. What is this, a support build on steroids? The bonuses from leveling up look pretty crazy, too.”

Apparently, Contracts were necessary for Summoning. *Does that work by winning in a fight or talking things out or what? And what does it mean to supply magic?*

::As long as the other party has consented, the Contract will be established whenever you will it. The moment that happens, the individual will be transformed into a magical entity and assimilated into your magic pool. Summoning them will expend the appropriate amount of MP and lower your max MP. This overall process is how you supply the Follower with your magic.

When you dispel a Summoning, your max MP will return to normal. However, your current MP will remain unchanged, so be mindful of that.:: *Ah, thank you for the explanation. This talking menu sure is useful, providing such succinct and informative answers when I simply think a question. So in other words, I can't Summon several Followers ahead of time and simply count on my MP being restored once I dispel them. I guess Unsummoning can't be used in lieu of an MP potion then. My max MP being lowered will limit my ability to use other spells too, so I'll have to give a bit of thought to how I use my MP pool.*

::I'm glad that you catch on so quickly. How about heading to the closest city to start with? There's an Adventurer's Guild there, so I recommend checking it out and registering.:: *You know, it's the strangest thing, but talking to you feels like talking to a real person. Can I assume that you'll be coming along too, Menu-san?*

::Oh, yes, that's right, you don't remember. Here, take a look at this.:: A new display suddenly popped up.



Kelvin's Followers [Available slots: 9]

Melfina (1,276 y/o, Female, Unknown, Unknown) Level: Unknown

Title: Unknown

HP: Unknown

MP: Unknown

Strength: Unknown Endurance: Unknown Agility: Unknown

Magic: Unknown

Luck: Unknown

Skills: Unknown



::I'll have you know, it was my very first time meeting someone who would ask *me*, a goddess, to 'Become my Follower!' You will take responsibility, won't you, *honey*? Also, to be clear, this is the 'telepathic connection' mentioned in the Summoning skill description.:: *"Okay, seriously, WHAT THE HELL was my*

past self doing?!?!”

And that was how my otherworld transmigration story began.

Chapter 1: The City of Parth

After recovering from Menu-san's — or Melfina's, I suppose — sudden “confession,” I set out for the closest city. Along the way, she told me the general story of what had happened before my transmigration.

Apparently, I had died in an accident, but it was an accident due to a slip-up by a god (a deity other than Melfina). Consequently, that god had approached Melfina, whose jurisdiction was transmigration, and begged her to take “special measures.” According to Melfina, this kind of thing wasn't all that rare. *So even gods and goddesses make mistakes, then?*

::You would be surprised at the number of gods and goddesses who are quite irresponsible with their powers. I'm different from them; I *do* take my job seriously, okay?::

As for this particular goddess who had been speaking to me inside my head, it turned out that she had once been an angel who had served another deity. Her long years of service had eventually been recognized, and she'd been promoted to Goddess of Transmigration and Reincarnation in this world. Compared to her peers, she was considered a total newbie. When my case had been brought to her, she had apparently accepted it while grumbling *this again?* to herself. Of course, I could only take Melfina's word for all of this.

::Right after you chose your skills, you immediately turned to press me for a Contract. You went on for nearly an hour saying, ‘I've fallen in love with you! Please come along with me!’ Honestly, I was feeling a bit bored after doing this job for several hundred years, so I eventually caved in and said yes.::

I had no memory whatsoever of this episode, but apparently I had fallen for Melfina at first sight. Now, though, I could only hear her voice.

Wait, hold on...you left because you were bored? It sounds like you are one of the irresponsible ones after all!

::Even gods and goddesses need a breather every once in a while. In terms

you would understand, it's paid leave! Don't worry; I've thrown all of my work at my subordinate. With one thing leading to another, I haven't taken any leave for several decades already, so I thought it would be a good time to do a bit of recharging.::

Threw your work at someone else? So you're treating my transmigration as a vacation?! If that's so, I'd appreciate it if you'd at least return my memories.

::The discarding of your memories was something that *you* decided on, honey. You didn't have enough skill points, so you asked me to take your memories in exchange for more.::

Why on earth would I say that to someone I'd fallen in love with? What was the point of forgetting all about it right afterwards?

::Well, you did say, 'Even without my memories, I know for a fact that I will fall in love with you all over again!' You were so direct and straightforward in your approach that I couldn't help but be slightly moved. In dating sim terms, it was Favorability +1. Congratulations.::

Ugh, please let her leave it at that. I may have no memory of it, but listening to this story makes me feel like I'm being forced to relive an embarrassing episode from my history. In any case, it seems like Melfina's appearance is totally in line with my personal preferences. Now I really want to get a look at her.

"Does the fact that we've already Contracted mean that I can Summon you now?"

::You can't at the moment. The amount of MP needed to materialize me is far beyond your current stats.::

Wind taken out of my sails right at the start. *Guess my goal now is to gain enough levels to Summon Melfina.*

::I look forward to both your growth and another novel and exciting confession from you.::

"There isn't going to be a confession, all right?"

As our conversation continued in this manner, I finally reached the top of a

hill, and a city came into view.

::That is our destination, the city of Parth.::

The city appeared quite sizable, composed of brick buildings surrounded by a stone wall that looked roughly ten meters high. I felt my heart begin to beat rapidly at the sight of a view so different from modern Japan, with “Now *this* is fantasy!” bouncing around inside my head. There was even a tall clock tower near the center of the city, with a design that wasn’t terribly different from the clocks that I was familiar with. *This may be another world, but perhaps our cultures are more similar than I thought.*

The outfit that I was wearing at the moment was casual garb for travelers in this world. According to Melfina, it was part of the standard welcome package for all transmigrators. It wouldn’t raise any eyebrows but its defensive capabilities certainly left something to be desired.

The stone wall had entrances on both the east and the west sides. I approached the gate and what would be my first human interaction in this world.

Hm, the guard’s noticed me.

“Hey there. Are you an adventurer? Sorry to trouble you, but could you show me your guild card or some other form of identification?”

“I’m sorry, I come from a small, rural village, so I don’t have any identification.”

My response was something that Melfina and I had worked out in advance. A sizable portion of the population of this world didn’t own any identification, so gate guards at a city of this size often issued IDs as part of their duties. It would require a bit of money, but Melfina had also given me some cash when I transmigrated, so there was no problem on that front. I suppose she was capable of doing her job properly after all.

::As I said, I *do* take my responsibilities seriously!::

I acquired my identification without any issues and headed towards my destination, the Adventurer’s Guild. Although I had been apprehensive at first, by now I was thoroughly ready to enjoy this new fantasy world to the fullest.



Upon the stone-paved roads ran carriages drawn by horses, clip-clopping alongside a bustling crowd of people of all ages, shapes, and forms. *Whoa, that person even has animal ears! Too bad it's a guy, though.*

::Honey, that's the guild right in front there.::

I looked around and saw a large building which, despite being made of bricks like all its neighbors, managed to give off a somewhat disorganized impression.

All right, here's the start of my new life! Ah, ah, ahem, ahem!

Folks, here we are at an Adventurer's Guild. What an imposing appearance it has, wouldn't you agree? Well then, how about we take a look inside?

::Em...what was with that random monologue?::

"No idea. Maybe I'm a bit too excited right now."

Entering the building, the first thing that I saw was a row of counters where guild receptionists were busy handling adventurers. *Hey, a lot of them are quite cute.*

Next to the counters was a bar, where there were a few people drinking despite the early hour. The place did not feel closed-in or unwelcoming, though. Rather, with groups huddled around tables to talk strategy, people milling around a bulletin board and going through what appeared to be quest posters, and others loudly and cheerfully toasting each other, the overall atmosphere was quite lively and warm.

So, pretty much the usual depiction of an Adventurer's Guild in RPGs brought to life. It made me happy to find that it was all just as I had imagined it to be. I'd been worried that there might be only meatheads in here, but there turned out to be a sizable number of normal young men and women too.

I joined one of the lines in front of a counter and waited a short while until it was my turn.

"Good morning! How may I help you today?"

A girl with brown hair done up in cute pigtails greeted me in a voice so bright and bubbly that it lifted my spirits. *Cheerful girls are great, aren't they?* I barely

caught myself before being sucked into her round, blue eyes. *Oops, now's not the time for that.*

"I'd like to register as an adventurer."

"Registration it is! Please fill out this form here. Would you like a scribe?"

"I'm good, thanks."

As part of the transmigration welcome pack, I had a full understanding of the local language, which also included reading and writing. *Thank Goddess for Melfina, right? Okay, so I have to fill in...just my name and class. Well, that's simple enough. Name's Kelvin; class is Green Mage. Done.*

"Thank you, Kelvin-sama. Please wait a few moments."

There was a reason I had written in "Green Mage." Summoners were apparently very rare in this world.

A more common class of a similar nature was Tamer. Unlike Summoner, this class involved taming monsters and making them do the Tamer's bidding. The ability had no MP costs, and the monsters could be kept at the Tamer's side twenty-four seven. Apparently, the higher the rank, the more monsters that could be Tamed. Only in this way, however, was it similar to Summoning.

The advantage of Summoning was that it could be used against not only monsters but also humans, elves, and even inorganic entities like golems. In addition, there were the stats boosts, the telepathic network, and the ability to Summon Followers anywhere within one's magical range. These buffs were, without a doubt, a very worthwhile tradeoff for the MP costs.

Those who could become a Summoner were extremely limited in number, to the point where there might be only one, if that, in each country. The instant one was found, he or she would immediately become the center of attention for the local higher-ups. As someone who wanted to live freely and enjoy this world at my own pace, such attention would only be a hindrance. So I had decided to hide my identity as a Summoner as well as I could going forward.

"Apologies for the wait. Here is your guild card."

I was handed a blue card decorated with wings that bore the letter F. *So this is*

how a guild card looks. Nice.

“Now, please allow me to provide a simple explanation of the guild system.”

According to the receptionist, adventurers were separated into seven different ranks. She even had a little board as a prop:

Rank F (Newcomer) ← Kelvin-san!

Rank E (Novice)

Rank D (Intermediate)

Rank C (Veteran)

Rank B (Master)

Rank A (Monster)

Rank S (Inhuman)

My rank was specially indicated with cutesy handwriting. *Yep, thanks, that does make it really easy to understand.*

“As you’ve only just registered, you will be starting from Rank F. The guild accepts various quests from a large range of sources, which we then assign ranks to and release for adventurers to accept.”

“In other words, as a Rank F, I can only take on Rank F quests?”

“You can accept quests one rank above your own. However, there will be a breach of contract penalty if you end up failing the quest, so please be mindful of that.”

Hmm...makes sense. That’s how they prevent people from carelessly punching above their weight.

“After completing ten quests in a row, you will move up to the next rank. Quests of a rank higher than your own will not provide any special bonuses. Please note that rank-ups from Rank C and above will require an exam.”

“Gotcha.”

“As for the quests themselves, there are four general classifications:

subjugation, bodyguard, harvesting, and unique. For subjugation quests, a part of the target's body will be necessary to serve as proof of success, so please don't forget to bring it back with you."

They need proof? What if I end up not being able to carry it? Like if I end up hunting too many targets?

"Are there any good quests for a beginner to start out with?"

"Of course. Would any of these interest you?"

Subjugate: 3x blue slimes

Harvest: 5x medicinal grasses

Unique: Find my cat

So...basically, the most fundamental ones. And it seems that unique quests are those that simply don't fit any other classification.

::Honey, how about using the blue slime quest as an opportunity to try establishing a Contract? Blue slimes would be perfect for a first attempt.::

Guess we thought of the same thing. I also want to try out Summoning as soon as possible. In a place beyond prying eyes, that is.

"I would like the blue slime quest, please."

"The blue slime quest. Very well."

I officially accepted the quest and left the guild. I didn't learn this until later, but the receptionist's name was Ange. *Guess I'll be in her care quite often going forward. Well then, let's move on to getting myself properly equipped. I don't have much money, though, so it's only going to be a basic weapon and some recovery items, I guess.*

::A Wooden Rod would be good. It provides almost no buffs to physical damage, but a faint amount of magic is contained within. It should at least make it easier to cast spells.::

And with that decision, I used up almost all of the cash that I'd arrived with.

For the sake of tonight's lodging fees, onward!



Without further ado, I left the city and made my way to a nearby plain. As far as the eye could see, it was plains, plains, and more plains, with only the occasional tree. It was so quiet and tranquil that I couldn't get the thought *it's so peaceful* out of my mind. I had no idea if it was sheer luck or not, but even while walking along a forest road on the way to Parth, I hadn't encountered a single monster. *Couldn't have asked for a better place to explore my abilities.*

“They said this is the general area where blue slimes appear.”

I looked around to see if there were any nearby. Eventually, I spotted a blue, jelly-like thing a short distance away.

::That is indeed a blue slime. How about trying to view its stats first?::

Following Melfina's suggestion, I activated Analyze Eye. Although I hadn't known how to use it beforehand, the skill immediately went into effect the moment that I thought about it. It felt as natural as breathing. *Seems like I won't have a problem using any skill that I possess.*

Blue Slime (0 y/o, Genderless, Blue Slime)

Level: 1

Title: None

HP: 5/5

MP: 0/0

Strength: 1

Endurance: 1

Agility: 2

Magic: 1

Luck: 2

Skills: Blunt Damage Resistance

So this is Analyze Eye. Apparently, it can tell me anything about my target.

::Analyze Eye can be used not only on living creatures but on items as well.

Your skill is currently at Rank S. For living creatures, you can Analyze targets up to a hundred levels above you. You can also Analyze inanimate objects up to your current rank.::

Doesn't that mean it's effective against basically everything? Hold on a moment...when I tried to read your stats, all of the fields came back as "Unknown." Does that mean that your level is above 100?

::Well, I *am* a goddess, after all.::

How much MP am I going to need to Summon you?! But I've gotten derailed. For now, I've got to focus on the blue slime in front of me.

I slowly inched towards the creature. I wanted to establish a Contract with it, but for that, I needed its consent. *Do I talk to it to convince it?*

::For monsters that don't understand words, you'll have to weaken it enough for it to be willing to submit to you. If you activate a Contract at that time, then the monster should consent. It's like the 'so-and-so looks like it wants to be your friend' thing.::

Clearly, Melfina-san was quite familiar with modern Japanese game franchises.

But back to the matter at hand...it seems like the slime might die from a single magic spell, so let's try to attack it with the Wooden Rod itself.

"Take that!"

I unleashed a blow at the blue slime, with only a small amount of power behind the swing. It was sent flying several meters, bouncing a few times on the ground. I activated Analyze Eye again.

"Remaining HP...3. Let's try Contracting with it now."

I held my hands out over the creature, which looked like it was currently trying to recover, and mentally willed it to Contract with me.



“Aagh, I feel something being drained out of my body. Is that supposed to happen?!”

::When attempting to establish a Contract, half of your remaining MP is expended, regardless of whether your attempt succeeds or fails. What you felt just now was probably due to using a large amount of magic all in one go::

“Tell me important things like that beforehand! Anyway, did I succeed?”

I turned to look at the blue slime just as it began to glow with a white light.
That’s too bright, dude.

::Congratulations. The Contract has been successfully established.::

“So we’re done?”

::The monster that you’ve just Contracted with does not yet have a name. Would you like to try giving it one?::

Hmm, a name...problem is, my naming sense easily veers into cringeworthy middle schooler territory with even the slightest trigger. Let’s play it safe here — wait, but I’m in a fantasy world...wouldn’t a cringey name not be cringey here?

“All right, from today onwards, your name will be Clotho. Let’s take care of each other, buddy!”

Clotho jumped up, jiggling intensely, then exploded into particles of light that were immediately sucked into my body. *So this is what turning into a magical entity means. Going by Melfina’s earlier explanation, I take it this means Clotho’s been assimilated into my magic pool.*

“Heeey, Clotho, can you hear me in there?”

Although I couldn’t hear Clotho’s words, its feelings seemed to flow directly into me. *It’s really happy right now, I think?*

::The telepathic connection works even without words, honey. This way, communication is possible between Followers too.::

Oh, I can feel Clotho being a bit scared. Please be nice to it, Melfina. I think I’ll call this the Follower Network. It’s even faster than communicating with words, so I can see this being very useful during a fight.

“Next is Summoning. If I’ve lost half of my MP from the Contract just now, I should still have 10 MP left. Would that be enough?”

::For a slime of this level, that’s more than enough. Oh, and I forgot to mention this before, but a Follower’s HP reaching 0 means that it’s dead, at which point the Contract is forcibly dissolved. Just be mindful of that.::

So HP reaching 0 equals death in this world? From the sound of things, it doesn’t seem like the classic gaming system of dying and reviving at a church or something exists here. Clotho is now a precious partner who’s going to accompany me going forward. I’ve gotta be careful not to slip up.

::As long as even 1 HP remains, you can dispel the Summoning and return the Follower to your magic pool. Magical entities naturally recover HP and MP over time, so be sure to make good use of that.::

Oh, I see. That’s a very helpful piece of information. Well then, since I have Melfina-sensei’s stamp of approval, let’s try out the Summoning skill now. And since I’m not sure what my magical range is yet, let’s just do it right here in front of me.

In an instant, a magic circle appeared before my eyes. But it was already gone in the time it took me to blink, replaced by the figure of Clotho. *Hm, Summoning is quite fast.*

“All right, so that’s our first goal of the day accomplished. Now for the subjugation quest.”

::Honey, you’re going to make Clotho kill those of its own race? That’s quite brutish of you, isn’t it?::

“Oh shi—!”

As I mentally berated myself for my lack of consideration, Clotho sent a thought my way.

“Slimes naturally follow a system of the strong absorbing the weak, so it’s okay? You sure, Clotho? You don’t have to force yourself, you know.”

Clotho jiggled its body in an effort to express its willingness to get started. *Well...all right, as long as you’re fine with it, I guess.*

“I don’t mind you absorbing the ones we defeat, but as proof of subjugation for our quest, I’m going to have to dissect them and take out the slime cores first, okay?”

Or so I had thought, but as it turned out, Clotho could already control its absorption process to selectively leave out the cores.

I didn’t have much MP left but, with that settled, I still wanted to try out a spell or two. So we set off in search of new targets.



With my newest companion in tow, we quickly sought out some more blue slimes. It wasn’t long before we found two of them.

“I’m going to try out a Green Magic spell. Clotho, I’ll attack one with magic and leave the other to you. Show me how you fight, all right?”

Clotho nodded in acknowledgment. With the stats bonuses from my Summoning in effect, defeating normal blue slimes should be a cinch for it. As for Green Magic, I had learned a few elementary spells from Melfina on the way over. Between Clotho’s Contract and the Summoning, I had just enough MP left for a single shot, but I also had recovery items on hand. I was confident that I could handle a lone slime.

“Wind!”

Wind was a Rank F Green Magic spell that materialized small blades of air to attack a target. Although it wasn’t all that strong, its MP cost was low and the attack itself was invisible, so it had seemed like a useful ability to me at first glance. My casting of Wind tore the blue slime apart, ending its life instantly.

“Clotho, your turn!”

Clotho shot forward with incredible speed and slammed into its target with great force. The charge caused the opposing blue slime to go flying, dead upon impact. Clotho’s speed before and after the Contract were like night and day. *Guess that goes to show how incredible the stats boost from Summoning is.*

::Honey, Rank S Summoning grants Followers +100 for all stats.::

Whoa, +100 for all stats?! I activated Analyze Eye to confirm Clotho’s current

numbers.

Clotho (0 y/o, Genderless, Blue Slime)

Level: 1

Title: None

HP: 105/105 (+100)

MP: 100/100 (+100)

Strength: 101 (+100)

Endurance: 101 (+100)

Agility: 102 (+100)

Magic: 101 (+100)

Luck: 102 (+100)

Skills: Blunt Damage Resistance

Passive Effects: Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S)

Wow...isn't this a bit too OP? At least now I understand why countries value Summoners so highly. If a Level 1 slime as a Follower already has monstrous stats like this, even a single Summoner with only slimes as Followers could be a formidable fighting force.

::Allow me to provide a bit more context. There is only one Rank S Summoner in this world right now, and that's you, honey. The other riff-raff are Rank B or Rank C at best, and their skill only provides +10 or +20 in the way of stats boosts. Contracting with slimes is not going to amount to much military strength for them.::

Oh, is that so? Then I suppose possessing this skill when I'm just starting out makes me quite the cheat character. And...is that the first time I've gotten praise from Melfina? Makes me kind of happy.

A short while later, after Clotho had defeated our third slime, a fanfare rang out.

Is that what I think it is? Is it that common mechanic of so many games?!

A screen appeared before me.

Level Up!

(Level 1 ⇒ Level 2)

Kelvin (23 y/o, Male, Human, Summoner)

Level: 2

Title: None

HP: 20/20 (+10)

MP: 23/35 (+20)

Strength: 3 (+2)

Endurance: 3 (+2)

Agility: 9 (+6)

Magic: 15 (+10)

Luck: 12 (+8)

Skills: Summoning (Rank S) [Available slots: 8], Green Magic (Rank F), Analyze Eye (Rank S), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points, Experience Sharing

◇ You have earned 100 Skill Points!

Thanks to my passive skills, the amount of growth that I'd gained from leveling up was remarkable. As my build was going to need a ton of MP, this made me extremely happy. I had even received a hundred skill points.

::Please check the Skills tab in your UI. The points you received can be used to acquire new skills.::

“Are things like this UI general knowledge here? The image appeared all by itself when I leveled up, too.”

::Yes, it is general knowledge. One merely has to call for ‘Status’ inside one’s mind to bring it up. From this UI, it is possible to confirm one’s own stats,

acquire skills, and manage party functions. However, it is not possible to read someone else's Status without their express permission.::

Ah, so that's where Analyze Eye comes in, then. I guess this is a world where game-like elements are considered commonplace. I suppose no one thinks twice about it, seeing this sort of thing their whole lives.

"Right, let's see what options we've got here."

I maneuvered to the Skills tab, which turned out to be a list of the names, effects, and costs of an incredible number of abilities. *How many skills are there?*

::Just so we're clear, this list does not contain all of the skills that exist. There are some that cannot be acquired until certain conditions have been met.::

"Why is Summoning so rare then? Didn't I just choose it normally from this list?"

::No, you were a special case. The list that you chose from before your transmigration was what you might call a bonus list.::

"So that means the bonus list probably isn't available from within this world? Well, never mind then."

With Clotho keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings, I started scanning through the list of available skills.

"Um...isn't the cost for acquiring new skills kinda low? These Rank F ones only cost ten points."

::There are two kinds of skill points: Talent Points, a certain amount of which one is born with, and Growth Points, which one receives upon leveling up. Although it varies from person to person, on average, people are born with fifty Talent Points and earn five Growth Points with each level-up.::

"Hey, but I earned 100 SP from my level-up just now. Even considering the amount I get is doubled, it's off by an order of magnitude."

::The points that you used up before your transmigration were your Talent Points. Again, there is some variation depending on the skill, but in general, the cost of skills at Rank F is 10 SP, Rank E is 20, Rank D is 40, Rank C is 80, Rank B is

160, Rank A is 320, and Rank S is 640. The only way to acquire higher rank skills is to work your way up from the bottom, which means that it costs a total of 1,270 SP to acquire a Rank S skill.::

“Which means...a normal person who manages to reach Level 100 would still only have enough points to get a Rank B skill.”

::Em...yes, that’s what the math works out to.::

“Uhh...I’m Level 1 right now, and I already possess two Rank S skills.”

::Well...you did give up your memories as payment.::

So basically, my current status is a compounding of cheats. All right, I’ll just tell myself that all otherworlders here are absurdly OP characters like me. Not that I know if there even are other otherworlders out there.

::Of course, all of the above only applies to the average person. There are incredible talents and frightening beings out there too, like the Demon Lord.::

Let’s just not think about this anymore. The growth of my stats seems almost paltry in comparison to the growth of my skills, so as long as I don’t do anything stupid, I should be able to avoid drawing unwanted attention to myself. For now, let’s get back to Parth before taking a more thorough look at the skills list.

And with that thought, Clotho and I finished up our subjugation quest.



Having completed the quest without issue, I returned to Parth with Clotho Unsummoned. Heading straight to the guild, I received my quest completion reward, then focused on finding an inn.

When I turned onto what I thought was the right road, a horse-drawn carriage waiting by the curb came into view. It had a cage in the back that was large enough to hold people inside. Within the cage were the figures of several young girls who were likely slaves, with their heads bowed. All of them were wearing only a single sheet of cloth.

Guess those are slaves? I still have empty Summoning slots, so maybe it would be a good idea to purchase one or two to party up with, to have more fighting strength at my disposal. After all, I don’t have a single adventurer acquaintance

in this world.

Amid my musings, the voices of two men, who were likely slave traders, reached my ears.

“I’ll have you know, I got my hands on some incredible merchandise the other day! Look at this! She’s an elf!”

“Damn, man! Aren’t they really hard to come by, with how rarely they leave their villages?! This one looks a bit thin and gaunt, but I’ve heard it said that all elves are breathtaking beauties. I’m sure she’ll shine if you give her just a little polishing!”

“Unfortunately, she’s actually a half-elf with mixed blood, but I managed to procure her at this price...”

“You serious?! Isn’t that too good of a bargain to be true?!”

“Bwahaha! I suppose it means my talent as a merchant has started to shine!”

Although the conversation between the men was rather inappropriate for roadside banter, the term “elf” had caught my attention. After all, I had yet to see a single elf since coming to this world. My eyes followed the direction that the two slavers were looking in, and sure enough, there was a young girl with long ears. Her hair was a dull yellow, but it was clearly very dirty, which led me to suspect that its original color was probably blond. For some reason, she was the only one under heavy lock and key. *Is it because she’s an elf?*

“Ah...”

All of a sudden, she looked up and our eyes just happened to meet. Was it only for a few seconds? I found myself completely taken in by her beautiful emerald green eyes, unable to avert my gaze. The half-elf girl, however, quickly lowered her head again.



::What's the matter, honey?::

“Nah, it's nothing.” *This is hardly the time for that. I barely have enough money for myself right now, let alone spare cash to buy a slave with. Let's think about it again after I have some more leeway with my finances.* “Well then, which road should we take?”

After a brief walk, we reached our destination. “Is this the inn that Ange-san described?”

I had asked Ange-san to recommend an inn to me, and this was the one she had told me about. It turned out to be a three-story brick building, with a sign depicting the silhouette of a small dancing fairy. The chimney rising from the roof was puffing out billows of smoke, likely due to the kitchen staff preparing dinner.

::‘Ange’s top recommended inn for starting adventurers that’s easy on the pursestrings!’, was it?::

“The Fairy’s Song, this has gotta be it. Let’s head inside.”

When I opened the door, a stocky, matronly woman came over from behind the counter to greet me. *Let me guess, this is the inn’s proprietress?*

“A new customer, eh? Welcome to the Fairy’s Song!”

From the look of things, the establishment was a combination of eatery and inn. The first floor was filled with wooden tables, many of which were occupied by youngsters in the middle of eating.

“Yes, I am. I would like a room for the night, please.”

“We hope you like it enough to continue staying with us. My name’s Clare. Pleasure to have you.”

“I’m Kelvin. I’ve heard that the food here is delicious. I’m already looking forward to it.”

“Hahaha, then I guess we’ve got to make it even more delicious tonight!”

After I paid the lodging fee, Clare-san showed me to my room while providing general information about the inn, meal times, washing, and so on.

Phew, I can finally take a breather. Only...

“I’d expected this, but to think they really don’t have a bath...”

::Only the royal castle and mansions belonging to nobles have baths. Commoners generally either take a dip in the river or wipe themselves down with a wet towel.::

“Living without a bath is really tough on a Japanese person. I definitely plan to live in a house with a bath someday!”

Excited about adding this to my growing list of goals, I reopened the Skills tab in my UI. I had narrowed down my choices earlier and now made a beeline for a particular skill.

“There it is!”

Concealment (Rank F) [SP Cost: 10]

Ability to conceal one’s Status against Analyze Eye up to Rank F. Also provides protection against Detection skills up to Rank F.

Acquiring this skill was a top priority, as it would help me to protect my own stats and abilities. According to my earlier conversation with Melfina, the skills that I owned were impossible to acquire through normal means. If I was found to be in possession of such skills at Level 2, it would definitely draw unwanted attention, so I raised Concealment straight up to Rank D without hesitation. After all, I had more than enough fighting strength for the kinds of enemies that I would be dealing with for now.

“This should do as a temporary countermeasure against someone else’s Analyze Eye. To be honest, I’d still like to raise it to Rank B as soon as possible, though.”

I decided to continue focusing on subjugation quests going forward. Aside from earning levels and the accompanying SP required for ranking up, it also seemed like a good avenue for working on my cooperation with Clotho. Speaking of which, after defeating our fifth blue slime earlier, Clotho had also leveled up and earned itself ten Growth Points. *I’ve found quite an excellent ally, if I do say so myself.* With those ten points, it had even acquired a new skill.

Absorption (Rank F) [SP Cost: 10]

The ability to absorb magic and convert it into energy. Effective against magic attacks. A higher skill rank increases the effectiveness of absorption.

I thought it a rather interesting skill. Clotho could use the absorbed energy to heal itself or even as a form of attack. With a high enough rank, the skill might enable Clotho to completely negate magic attacks. I was quite excited to witness my new partner's ongoing development.

“But you know, today's fights were far too easy. Neither Clotho nor I took any damage at all.”

::Blue slimes are monsters that even beginning adventurers can safely hunt. It would have surprised me to see you struggling against opponents of this level. However, there are individual creatures with abnormally high levels who may have Evolved into a different race, so never let your guard down.::

“Do all monsters Evolve when they reach higher levels?”

::Level is not the only condition for a monster's evolution. There are many other factors, including its surrounding environment and preferred diet. This is especially true for slimes, which have a very wide range of evolutionary paths. Even I cannot predict what Clotho will become.::

If it's something that even Melfina can't predict, it'll really be something for me to look forward to!

“So, you can evolve into many different types of beings, eh, Clotho? I'll be looking forward to it!”

I could feel the slime returning a lively acknowledgment inside my head. And with that, I headed downstairs for dinner. I had been too engrossed with fighting during lunchtime to eat anything, so I was more than ready to try my very first meal in this wild new world.

Chapter 2: Black Spirit Knight

A week had passed since my transmigration. During that time, the only thing I had done was subjugation quests. The day after my first encounter with the blue slimes, I had tried accepting another Rank F quest, but it, too, had proven far too easy. After that, I switched to accepting only Rank E quests.

“Congratulations, Kelvin-san! With the completion of this quest, you have now been promoted to Rank E!” gushed Ange-san.

Truthfully, I didn’t feel a real sense of achievement. The vast majority of targets for Rank E quests were monsters that relied on fighting as a group, such as orcs and kobolds, but their intelligence was only marginally above that of the Rank F monsters. They stood absolutely no chance against Clotho and me — not with our insane stats and telepathic connection.

“I was quite worried when you switched to accepting Rank E quests halfway through, you know? After all, it didn’t look like you were interested in partying up with anyone.”

It isn’t that I don’t want to party up with people, it’s that I can’t. The day I party up with someone is the day I get exposed as a Summoner. And even without party members, I already have a stalwart partner that I can rely on.

::Well, Followers that you Summon automatically enter into a party with you, so technically you’ve been partying up this whole time.::

Technically, yes. But to everyone else, it probably looks like a newcomer — a mage, no less — completing multiple quests above his own rank all by himself. Yeah, I suppose that would draw attention.

::Wasn’t it going to be your policy to *not* stand out and draw attention to yourself?::

It proved far too tedious. Forgive me.

As I was in the middle of my internal conversation with Melfina, Ange-san abruptly leaned forward over the counter. *H-Hold on, you’re way too close!*

“Kelvin-san, are you actually someone who’s served as a court mage in another country before? You’re far too strong to be an ordinary newcomer.”

“I-I’m afraid I can’t go into details, sorry.”

“Oh, no, no, no, of course, I’m the one who should apologize for asking such an intrusive question! I know it goes against convention.”

Ugh, yeah, I really do feel bad, but we’ll have to leave it at that.

“You really should be careful, though. Knowing you, you’ll probably be taking on Rank D quests now, right?”

“Yep, that’s right.” There was no point lying about it, as I would need her to process the new quests anyway. “But if I ever feel that I’m in danger, I’ll run away immediately, I promise. My ability to run away from things is the only thing I’m proud of.”

“Please at least buy yourself a new set of equipment! You’re still using the same gear that you started out with a week ago!”

Oh right, I’d forgotten about that. It’s true that I haven’t changed anything out yet. Hubris leads to ruin, as they say, so maybe it’s a good time to use the funds I’ve saved up and get a good set of protective gear.

“Hahaha, all right, I get it. I’ll go buy some proper equipment. So...can I take on a Rank D quest, please?”

“Do you really get it?” she sighed. “Let me see, Rank D quests...”

While Ange-san sifted through the relevant posters, I was suddenly addressed by a man standing next to me.

“If it’s Rank D you’re looking for, how about the Black Spirit Knight subjugation quest?”

“Black Spirit Knight?”

“C-Cashel-san...you’re back...”

Who is this dude? I had been to the guild numerous times now, but this was my first time seeing him there. Although his appearance was that of a suave blond hunk, he gave off a rather nasty vibe. I had no way of backing it up, but

my senses were telling me that this guy was the malicious and scheming type.

“Hey there, Ange-san. Yeah, I’m back. Just got in, actually.”

“We...thank you for your efforts, as always. How was your quest?”

“Completed without a hitch, of course. Though we did have to get a bit serious at the lizardman nest,” he chuckled.

Although Cashel was looking at her with a wide smile, Ange-san’s face was frozen into a stiff expression. The vibe coming from the other adventurers in the room had also turned decidedly unfriendly.

“By the way, you’ve just been promoted to Rank E, right? Congratulations! As someone ahead of you on the adventurer’s path, I’m happy for you!”

“And who might you be?”

“Oh, look at me, where are my manners? My name is Cashel. I’m a Rank D adventurer.”

Why are every one of this man’s mannerisms so pretentious and dramatic? Hearing a whispered buzz rising amongst the adventurers nearby, I decided to do a little eavesdropping.

“Look at him spouting those lines despite possessing the strength of a Rank B!”

“It’s not like you don’t know how much he loves destroying newcomers. That overconfident new guy who’s thinking of taking on Rank D quests has definitely caught his eye.”

“And there isn’t anyone in this guild stronger than Cashel. Let’s just stay out of it and pretend to see nothing.”

Those guys whispering quietly to each other in the back of the bar are Rank D, aren’t they? So even those of the same rank as him are afraid to speak up? That lends some credence to their gossip.

“As it happens, my party and I were talking about taking on the Black Spirit Knight quest next. Would you like to come along? From the sound of it, Rank E quests are too easy for you, aren’t they?”

“P-Please hold on a moment! It’s true that the quest is Rank D, but that Black Spirit Knight is especially powerful! It is, in all likelihood, a unique subspecies. The quest is too dangerous for Kelvin-san!”

“Hahaha, it’ll be fine, Ange-san. Weren’t you two just talking about how he was completing Rank E quests all by himself? Anyway, we’ll be there to help him, so there’s nothing to be worried about!”

“That’s...” Ange-san visibly bit back her response.

“I’m very grateful for the offer, but I don’t intend to party with anyone. And it doesn’t benefit you to team up with someone like me.”

“Oh, come on, there’s no need to be shy. Just think of it as a good learning opportunity!”

Damn, this guy is persistent. I definitely have no intention of partying with him, though. Just a few moments before, while Ange-san had been voicing her concerns, I’d snuck a peek at Cashel’s Status. The conclusion that I’d arrived at was that this fellow was bad news.

Cashel (25 y/o, Male, Human, Magic Swordsman)

Level: 34

Title: Murderer

HP: 315/315

MP: 104/104

Strength: 156 (+20)

Endurance: 131

Agility: 126

Magic: 102

Luck: 89

Skills: Sword Mastery (Rank B), Herculean Strength (Rank E), White Magic (Rank E), Covert Action (Rank E), Concealment (Rank F), Conversation (Rank E)

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank F)

His stats were even higher than Clotho's, and he possessed a few skills that would likely raise eyebrows if exposed. But most of all, his title was...well, self-explanatory. That said, it didn't seem like he was going to back off. He had apparently set his crosshairs on me. *Fine, then, let's go with it.*

"How about a competition instead?"

"A competition?"

"Mhm. Why don't we compete to see who can defeat the Black Spirit Knight first? With me going at it alone, of course."

"This is hardly an opponent that can be challenged solo, my friend. As I said before, I'll be going with my own party. Are you sure about those conditions?"

"Sure as I can be."

If he's coming for me anyway, I might as well spring a trap of my own. In all likelihood, Cashel is planning to assault me either while I'm in the middle of fighting the Black Spirit Knight, when I'm tired right after the fight, or while I'm on the road. I have no idea if he enjoys killing just for the sake of it or if he wants to steal my credit. Either way, he should make for a worthy opponent. It's the perfect opportunity to gauge the results of my training and leveling so far. I might even get to try that special move out...

::Honey, your way of thinking is slowly devolving into that of a battle junkie::

Oh, shush.

"Haha, if you're that confident, then sure, count me in."

"Great, let's get this competition started. Ange-san, please help me complete the paperwork for the quest."

"Kelvin-san..."

The expression on Ange-san's face was still filled with worry and she looked to be on the verge of tears, but I was past the point of backing out. *It's time to see how far my power can take me.*



"So...what'd you think of him?"

Cashel had left the guild and was now in a dark alleyway. Waiting there for him were two men who had been mingling and having casual conversations with adventurers in the guild's bar earlier.

"Boss, that newcomer, he might be more of a bigshot than we thought," answered the disheveled man with a slim build, who painted the very picture of a scraggly bandit. "My Analyze Eye is Rank C. At the very least, he possesses Concealment at a rank even higher than that."

"And here I was thinking him a bit too sure of his abilities. So he's got something that he's hiding, then."

"Hey, Cashel, you gonna play and kill him too, right? Lemme fight him first!" blustered the huge man with bursting muscles. Cashel merely laughed and shrugged, by now quite used to dealing with this roughneck, who had less self-restraint than a five-year-old.

"Raji, calm down a bit, will you? That fool actually challenged me to a competition. We have to respect that fiery will of his, don't we? As his 'seniors.'"

"Ahh, so this is a learning opportunity for him. Raji, don't break him with brute force like you did the one before. Teaching is all about being gentle."

"I dunno 'bout these things! I'll do what I always do!"

"What a meathead, as usual..."

It was about half a year ago that Cashel had started working with these two. At the time, he'd happened to come across a village that was being sacked. Although he was an adventurer, he was also a thrill killer who was always on the hunt for fresh prey. Sometimes he would use his well-chiseled features as a lure, while at other times he would go straight in from the front with his swordsmanship. And thanks to the Covert Action and Concealment skills that he owned, he had managed to stay well-hidden.

The name of the smaller man was Gimul. He had once been part of a well-known gang, but the bandits had been thoroughly destroyed in a fight with a high-ranked adventurer. With the help of Analyze Eye, he'd managed to obtain key information ahead of time and had slipped away before anyone else. His

craftiness and ability to take quick action were what had saved him. For days he had lived under nothing but the sky, and all he had managed to take with him was a single knife. He knew only one way of making a living.

The hulk of a man was Raji. He'd been a mercenary who waded through battlefields in pursuit of blood. However, he enjoyed killing not only enemy soldiers but civilians as well, and in such cruel and brutal ways that both countries had ultimately placed a bounty on his head. Killing the bounty hunters who took it upon themselves to come for him had been fun for a while, but eventually even that lost its appeal. At that point, he'd decided to set off for some place far away, hopping from country to country as he went.

It was in that fateful village where these three had met each other. Neither the country nor guild had time or resources to send help, so the village had been completely decimated. The only thing left behind was a scene of carnage and a mountain of corpses that Cashel had cast Concealment on. His skill was Rank F, which meant that anyone who possessed Analyze Eye would see through it with a single look. However, it had earned them enough time to escape scot-free.

What the three men had between them was by no means friendship, but rather a temporary alliance built on similar interests. With Parth as their base, they had managed to have their fun without getting caught so far. But rumors that Cashel was using his status as an adventurer to prey on newcomers had recently begun to circulate after some of their "fun" had gotten out of hand. The suspicions now falling on their partner didn't bother Gimul or Raji much, however, as they knew they could easily abandon him at any time. Since the three of them only met under the veil of night, no one else even knew about their relationship. If the opportunity ever arose, the two thugs were more than ready to sell out Cashel and collect the bounty themselves.

This was the current dynamic between the men when Kelvin arrived in Parth. Cashel had been away on an expedition, while Gimul and Raji whiled away their days in the guild bar. It was only a matter of time before Kelvin, with his ability to complete quests quickly one after another, had caught their eye.

"But still, to compete with us for the Black Spirit Knight subjugation quest on his own? What the hell is he thinking?"

“Who knows? He’s probably just overconfident that he could pull it off.”

“That’s good! That’s good! Gonna be fun to kill!”

“Well...if it ever comes to it, we’ll leave things to you, Raji.”

Gimul and Raji had no way of knowing it, but Cashel was actually planning on using the competition to get rid of them both. Naturally, he had caught on to their plan to shift the blame for the string of dead newcomers onto himself. This particular subjugation quest had been ranked ‘D’ simply because the Black Spirit Knight in question had appeared within the depths of the Ancient Castle of Evil Spirits, a dungeon of the same level. Nobody who attempted the quest had ever returned, though

On the way back from his previous expedition, Cashel had made a small detour to do a little scouting. It had taken but a single glimpse for him to realize that this Black Spirit Knight was far different from the others. *I can use him to get rid of these two fools*, thought Cashel. And so he had concocted a foolproof plan for their demise, with a typical thrill kill session as bait.

What would eventually lead to the downfall of all three men was the fact that not a single one of them had thought to be wary of the newcomer that they were targeting. Gimul’s Analyze Eye proving ineffective should have already warned them that maybe, just maybe, this individual was not exactly a “newcomer” in the true sense of the word.



After leaving the guild, I browsed a few stores with the intention of finding myself a new set of gear. I had saved up a fair bit of cash from completing Rank E quests, and aside from wanting to fulfill my promise to Ange-san, there was now a more immediate need for the upgrade. I sold my Wooden Rod and replaced it with a Verdant Staff. Verdant Staves had a great affinity with Green Magic, and could supposedly boost my MP quite a bit. As for my outfit, I upgraded from the standard traveler’s garb to a magic robe.

“Judging from the markers that I set on Cashel and his buddies as a precaution, it seems they have no intention of starting anything within the city walls.”

::The risk is probably too high. It would be so much easier to assault you in the depths of the dungeon.::

Presence Sensing was a skill that allowed me to perceive the presence of living creatures around me. If I memorized the feel of someone's presence, I could figure out their location at any time simply by focusing my attention on that individual. I had originally acquired the skill as a basic countermeasure against Covert Action, so the added abilities turned out to be a pleasant surprise.

The fact that Cashel had accomplices mingling amongst the adventurers in the guild bar was something that I had realized almost immediately. Just to be safe, I had previously used Analyze Eye on every single adventurer in the guild. I had then made the effort to memorize the faces of anyone that I thought might pose a threat to me, and had taken the time to come up with plans to defend myself against each of them.

Among those were two men that I felt were especially dangerous. Their names were Gimul and Raji, and they spent almost every day drinking from morning to night. First of all, their levels and statuses greatly surpassed those of the adventurers they were mingling with. But what clinched it for me were their titles, just like with Cashel. Gimul's title was Marauder, while Raji's was Slaughterer.

With two people like that doing nothing but throwing back alcohol day after day in the exact same seats, it would be strange for me not to be wary of them.

::When Cashel called out to you, those two were also the first to turn around.::

"Especially that Gimul guy, he has Rank C Analyze Eye, right? Prioritizing a higher Concealment rank was the right choice after all."

On my very first day, I had come to the guild to turn in my quest without having acquired that skill yet. Thankfully, the misstep had not blown up in my face.

Just a random thought, but aren't there other people who possess Analyze Eye? Why is everyone just sitting on their asses without doing anything? Are titles not enough proof, and criminals need to be caught red-handed in this

world?

“Judging from their stats, Raji looks specced for close combat, while Gimul is very likely a scout or support type.”

Gimul (19 y/o, Male, Human, Bandit)

Level: 27

Title: Marauder

HP: 92/92

MP: 36/36

Strength: 84

Endurance: 81

Agility: 132

Magic: 30

Luck: 29

Skills: Throwing (Rank E), Analyze Eye (Rank C), Concealment Detection (Rank C)

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank F)

Raji (33 y/o, Male, Human, Berserker)

Level: 36

Title: Slaughterer

HP: 370/370

MP: 4/4

Strength: 203 (+40)

Endurance: 169 (+40)

Agility: 37

Magic: 37

Luck: 51

Skills: Pugilism (Rank C), Herculean Strength (Rank D), Iron Wall (Rank D), Auto Healing (Rank F)

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank F)

Well, in any case, there's nothing for it but to head to the Ancient Castle of Evil Spirits. It seems like they have no intention of making the first move, but there's no telling what they might do if I make them wait too long.

I trekked north, cutting through the forest where I had first arrived in this world. After following an animal trail for a while, I found my destination. True to its name, its ancient facade was crumbling in various places, and its walls were covered with masses of unkempt vines. *What an overwhelming aura...this is the very image of a haunted castle.*

Until recently, this location had been a hub for talented intermediate adventurers in search of a Rank D dungeon. After the Black Spirit Knight in question showed up, however, footfall had plunged like a rock. Consequently, with Cashel and his friends still making their way through the forest, I was completely alone as I ventured inside.

"I know where I am right now, but do *all* of the spawnable monsters have to be undead and *only* undead?" I grumbled, while casting Wind left and right to repel the creatures that had instantly begun to swarm me.

::Are you perhaps uncomfortable with the horror genre?::

"Well, I wouldn't ever look it up of my own accord."

The majority of the monsters that filled this place were of the zombie and ghost varieties, and each of them cut a pretty gruesome figure. It wasn't quite enough to shake me...but hey, disgusting is disgusting, right? Fortunately, my initial revulsion gradually dissipated as I proceeded deeper into the dungeon and grew more accustomed to the sights. I was more than capable of handling mobs of this level on my own, so Clotho had yet to receive any stage time. My faithful partner was still on standby.

After defeating several dozen zombies, I finally arrived at a gigantic door,

from beyond which I could sense an incredibly powerful presence radiating.

“Oh...it’s there all right. And as for Cashel and company, it seems they’ve just entered the dungeon. They’ll probably barrel straight down the path that I cleared, which means they’ll be here in about five minutes, I guess?”

::You think they decided to go with catching you in a pincer attack while you’re in the middle of your fight with the Black Spirit Knight?::

I looked around, my brain whirling. The area in front of the great door was a medium-sized room connected to the rest of the dungeon by way of a single corridor. Despite some general wear and tear, and the crumbled rows of pillars lining the path from the corridor to the door, the room itself looked to be of sturdy enough construction. *Seems there won’t be any issues with fighting in here.*

“Right then, let’s start making preparations.”



Not long after I’d finished setting things up, Cashel and his friends reached the room where I was waiting.

“So there you are, Cashel-san. Oh, are the two behind you the party members that you mentioned? Well, anyway, I’m almost one hundred percent sure that the Black Spirit Knight is behind that door over there.”

“Hmm...wasn’t this supposed to be a competition to see who could complete the subjugation quest first? And yet you stayed to wait for us? Quite the gentleman, aren’t you?”

Cashel looked slightly surprised, as if things were rather different from what he’d expected. Maybe his plan had been to assault me while I was busy dealing with the Black Spirit Knight, just as Melfina had suggested, or to strike when I let my guard down after the fight. Seeing the newcomer who had proposed the competition waiting patiently for his arrival was clearly a scenario that hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“As you can see, as long as we don’t cross the threshold of this door, the Black Spirit Knight won’t come out to attack us,” I noted, pushing the creaky door open ever so slightly. Through the crack, the figure of a large, imposing man

clad in jet black plate armor could be seen. Rather than waiting for prey to approach, my impression was that he was standing guard and protecting something. I could tell at a glance that the room had once been an audience hall, as the tasteful ornamentation still retained much of its beauty despite the ravages of time. And the object the man was standing in front of — it was a throne, a seat reserved solely for the king who had once reigned over this castle.

“Whatcha tryin’ to say? You took a look and realized you couldn’t beat it on your own, so you wanna team up with us after all?” taunted Raji in a voice so loud that it echoed through the room, sending a tiny spike of pain into my ear.

“You wish. I still intend to win this competition, of course. But I can’t have you guys making things difficult for me in the middle of my fight with the Black Spirit Knight.” I finally dropped my polite tone. “Or should I say, I can’t have you guys using me to get rid of it for you, hm?”

Noticing the change in my demeanor, the three men immediately fell into battle formation. Cashel and Raji were in front, while Gimul backed up slightly to stand behind them at an angle.

“He already knows about us, boss.”

“If so, I don’t understand his motives in coming here all alone. Hey, ‘newcomer,’ are you a guild hire? Or are you a bounty hunter after Raji’s head?”

“Nah, nothing grand like that. This was merely a chance encounter. It was you guys who approached me in the first place, remember?”

“You sure that wasn’t just a ploy to make us fall into your trap? Pretending to be a newcomer and racking up achievements to draw our interest?”

“What a guy...little wonder he possesses such high-ranked skills!”

Is it me or is this whole conversation way off base? I don’t have high-ranked skills because I’m high level — it’s just the way I am!

::Honey, it’s not like the misunderstanding changes what you have to do, so just get on with it.::

Aye, aye, ma’am.

“Well, there’s no point delving into the nitty gritty, right? Bottom line is, you guys tried to spring a trap on me, but got caught in my trap instead.”

Cashel laughed. “You sure are good at joking, newcomer. You’ve made a big mistake with your positioning. The exit is behind the three of us, while the door behind you leads to the Black Spirit Knight. On top of that, you’re outnumbered. Who’s the one at a disadvantage here?”

You’re right, of course...on the surface, that is.

“You never know until you try, right? None of us are here for tea and a friendly chat, so you, the big lumbering oaf, how about you stop shaking in fear and come get a piece of me already?”

“Who’s shaking?! I’ll shut your smart mouth, you puny mage!” roared Raji, charging straight at me. As I’d expected, he was extremely susceptible to provocation. *A single-celled organism, just as he looks.*

“Raji! Don’t rise to the bait!” Cashel shouted, but it was too late. The spell that I’d set up in advance had already activated.

“Huh?!”

A patch of ground that had been plain stone just moments before suddenly turned into a large bog that trapped Raji’s legs.

“You bastard! What did you do?!”

“I don’t know, how about you tell me?”

It was, of course, the Rank D spell Mud Bind, which I’d hidden with Concealment. The spell changed the targeted ground into a bottomless bog, restraining anyone who was unfortunate enough to be caught in it. Casting it was normally a rather conspicuous affair, but since no one present could see through my Concealment, Raji had charged straight into the trap without me having to lift a finger.

“This...is this Concealment?!”

“My Concealment Detection didn’t catch it at all!”

Well, yeah, I made my preparations knowing that you wouldn’t be able to see through it with your Rank C skill. Concealment is turning out to be even more

useful than I'd imagined.

“Shit, a stupid bog like this...I can get out with raw power alone!”

“I would advise you to not flail around needlessly. That bog is bottomless,” I offered helpfully while casting Wind at all three of my opponents.

Cashel was threading his way towards me through the storm of invisible blades, carefully detouring around the bog. Raji took the attacks head on, but the damage done to him was fairly insignificant. As for Gimul...

“Gimul, what the hell! You running away?!”

“Hah, yeah, sorry, boss, but I ain't staying around for this. You two have fun! My instincts are telling me that this guy's real trouble. So long!”

::Honey, Gimul's heading for the exit now, and Cashel will reach our position in ten seconds.::

Not a problem. Everything's still going according to plan.

“Block the exit, Clotho!”

The passageway leading out was still within my magical range, which meant that I was capable of Summoning Clotho right behind my attackers' backs.

“Wh-What is this?!”

For the briefest of moments, a magic circle shone brightly at the entrance to the corridor. Gimul stopped in his tracks, raising his guard. When the light dissipated, he found himself face to face with a blue slime. And it was no ordinary slime, but a gigantic one almost Raji's size.

Clotho (0 y/o, Genderless, Slime Gluttonia)

Level: 12

Title: Devourer

HP: 465/465 (+100)

MP: 176/176 (+100)

Strength: 223 (+100)

Endurance: 231 (+100)

Agility: 196 (+100)

Magic: 180 (+100)

Luck: 191 (+100)

Skills: Gluttony (Unique Skill), Absorption (Rank D), Storage (Rank B), Blunt Damage Resistance

Passive Effects: Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank B)



It had only been a few days earlier when, during one of our usual subjugation quests, Clotho had Evolved. After absorbing the monster that we'd defeated, my companion had abruptly frozen in place.

"And that's the last one for today's subjugation quest. Uh, what's wrong, Clotho?"

The slime's body was jiggling like always, but it wasn't responding to my voice at all. Nothing was coming through the Follower Network either.

"Are you okay, Clotho?!"

::Honey, Clotho is trying to Evolve right now.::

"Evolve...you mean that process you mentioned when I first Contracted with it?"

::Yes, that, although there's no telling what triggered it. For now, let's just give Clotho some space.::

Heeding Melfina's advice, I obediently took a step back to watch, but my heart was pounding like a drum. I was worried out of my mind.

::Looks like it's almost there.::

As if responding to Melfina's words, Clotho's body began to shine so brightly that I had to avert my eyes. When the light subsided, the slime's figure...*uh, has there been some sort of mistake?*

"Clotho, you've sure gotten big since I last saw you!"

My partner, which had previously reached no higher than my knees, had

grown so huge that it was even taller than me. *Are there no limits to the wonders of adolescence?*

::A Slime Gluttonia....::

“Is that Clotho’s new species name?” I asked, remembering half a beat later that I had Analyze Eye, and activating it.

“Hot damn, all your stats have shot up across the board! What is this ‘Unique’ label attached to your new skill, Gluttony?”

::Unique skills are special and belong exclusively to a certain race or species, or perhaps even to a single individual. They are usually much more powerful than normal skills. The new skill that Clotho has acquired, Gluttony, appears to grant it the ability to steal a portion of the stats from a target that it eats.::

Doesn’t that mean Clotho is going to get increasingly stronger the more it eats? And what, there’s no upper limit? I’ve been having it Absorb all of the monsters that we’ve defeated so far, so...what, is it going to get stats points every time it Absorbs something going forward?! Well, here we go then, this is the story of how Clotho became the most powerful being in the history of the world!

::With this Evolution, Clotho has mutated into a Slime Gluttonia. It was several hundred years ago that such a creature last appeared, in Toraj, the Country of Water. Unlike Clotho, who is still very young, the last one was a full-fledged adult. Toraj is a magic-focused country that had dozens of court mages who specialized in Blue Magic, but every single attack they threw at the monster, regardless of size and scale, was simply Absorbed, as if the goal was to feed it rather than kill it. Almost half of Toraj was obliterated before a Hero finally arrived and defeated it.::

That almost makes Clotho sound like a Demon Lord — wait, so this world really has Heroes?

::In fact, Slime Gluttonias are considered pseudo Demon Lords in this world. And yes, there are Heroes here too. In fact, I transmigrated the latest ones over not so long ago.::

“I’m sorry, wait, what?”

::The Oracle of the Holy Empire of Deramis performed a summoning ritual, so I answered. Those Heroes must have leveled up quite nicely by now, I would imagine. It was a lot of work finding youngsters with both potential and looks.::

“Did I just hear you drop a crazy spoiler on me like it was nothing? Let me guess, the Oracle performed the ritual because the Demon Lord is resurrecting or something along those lines?”

::Yes, something like that. It’s completely unrelated to you, however, so rest easy. To be honest, I’ve already had my fill of that whole experience, so I’d prefer it if you would actively steer clear of those guys.::

“If you say so...”

There really isn’t much that I can do about that except take a wait-and-see approach anyway. And right now, Clotho’s more important. We definitely need to have a celebration when we get back tonight!



“Wh-What’s with this slime?! I’ve never seen this species before!” wailed Gimul, thoroughly flustered by the monster that had suddenly appeared before him. It was an understandable reaction. Using Analyze Eye, he’d found himself looking at a species he had never heard of, with stats that were almost double his own despite the low level, plus a unique skill...and above all, the buffs from Summoning. His mind didn’t even know how to begin processing what he was seeing, and he fell into a state of sheer panic.

“Hey, Gimul, what’s wrong?! What is that thing?!”

“Gimul, back up! You’re too close to it!”

Cashel stopped in his tracks, and even Raji called out while continuing his struggle with the bog. None of it helped to calm Gimul down, though.

“Clotho, finish him,” I ordered, keeping my eyes on Cashel.

Clotho produced a whip-like tentacle and cracked it towards Gimul. Naturally, the bandit was unable to react in time.

“Oof! Ugh...”

Receiving the full force of Clotho’s attack, Gimul was sent flying into a wall. It

was enough to leave him at death's doorstep.

"Well, can't expect much more from someone with 81 Endurance, I suppose."

"Wait, you have Analyze Eye too?!"

Cashel turned back towards me and brought his sword up.

"What's happened to your kind and gentlemanly act, Cashel-senpai?"

"You bastard..."

Suddenly, a loud explosion rang out. It was Raji.

"Raaaahhh! Fist of the Enraged Demon!"

Raji's fist became enveloped in a red aura, which he then slammed into the bog that had swallowed him up to his knees, causing it to instantly disperse. By now, the madman was fully fixated on Clotho, and he was grinning ear to ear like a kid with a new toy.

"Cashel! I'll take on this slime! You do something about *him*!"

"Good decision for a musclehead. Leave this guy to me."

Damn, so Cashel's regained his cool. That battle junkie Raji seems like the type to say and do things without regard for his surroundings, but this time it's actually worked in their favor.

::You dropped the ball there, honey. You should have finished Raji while he was stuck in the bog.::

You're right, that was my bad. If I mean to disable someone, I need to disable them fully. If I mean to kill someone, I need to ensure that they're dead. I thought I would be fine after taking the Nerves of Steel skill, but I guess I'm still conflicted inside. This is something that I'll need to work on.

"All right, time for me to redeem myself."

"What're you talking about? Sorry, newcomer, but I'm going to crush you with everything that I have."

"I'm counting on it. Let's get this party started!"



“Take this! Kick of the Enraged Demooooon!”

Raji’s right leg took on a red aura as he slammed it into Clotho with every ounce of force he could muster. Just like Cashel, Raji also possessed power on par with a Rank B adventurer. His Enraged Demon attacks were a series of ultimate moves that he had developed before his mercenary days, born from his Pugilism skill and a massive amount of training. These attacks were powerful enough to open up a large hole in a castle wall, and were how he had destroyed Kelvin’s Mud Bind with a single punch. Even an adventurer with a fair bit of ability would die instantly upon taking one such attack head-on.

Boing...

When unleashed against Clotho, however, Raji’s ultimate merely produced a funny sound as the entire force of it was absorbed straight into the enormous slime’s body. This was possible thanks to the Blunt Damage Resistance that Clotho possessed, which essentially made it the worst possible opponent for Raji.

“Shit! What’s with this slime’s body?! My attacks aren’t doing any damage at all!”

If Gimul had managed to warn his companions about Clotho’s stats beforehand, Raji might not have been so confused. Unfortunately for him, that knowledge was forever beyond his reach now. Besides, Raji wasn’t one to know all that much about skills in the first place...

“Goddammit, well, there’s more where that came from!”

Just as it had done with Gimul moments before, Clotho sprouted tentacles and brandished them at Raji. This time, there were four tentacles protruding, assaulting the thug from every direction. By blocking and parrying, the Berserker somehow managed to hang on, but total evasion was not an option. While the two were more or less matched in Strength and Endurance, there was a significant disparity when it came to Agility. Because of this, Raji had no choice but to remain on the defensive.

In the middle of the frenzied exchange, Raji noticed another tentacle of Clotho’s snaking along the ground. He immediately jumped in the opposite direction from where it was heading.

“The hell you doin’?!”

Glancing over, Raji realized that the tentacle was reaching for the remains of the bog where he had been trapped just a few minutes earlier. He watched as the tentacle proceeded to suck up the leftover magic on the ground.

—

If the target manages to break free from my Mud Bind, feel free to Absorb that magic for yourself...

—

True to Kelvin’s orders, Clotho obediently consumed the remaining residue of the Mud Bind spell. The insignificant amount of damage that the slime had taken was instantly healed. The rest of the acquired magic went towards its Storage skill, which enabled Clotho to store and produce both magic and items, in effect turning the creature into a walking repository. Clotho could even place parts of its own body into Storage, and in so doing, freely adjust its own size.

“What — it’s gotten even stronger than before?!”

The whip-like attacks rained down harder than ever, slowly but steadily driving Raji to his limits. Adeptly taking advantage of a split second of vulnerability, Clotho managed to wrap all of its tentacles around Raji’s limbs, rendering him completely immobile. Then it took a huge jump...

“No, no, don’t come heeere!!!”

Clotho’s gigantic body slammed into Raji, completely emptying his HP bar. The monstrous slime then wasted no time in Absorbing the body of its prey...



Cashel raised his beloved sword and cast Auspicious, a Rank E White Magic spell, on himself. The spell granted its target natural healing and a slight boost to Luck. It was common practice in battle to give oneself an edge through the help of such buffs. In fact, Kelvin had cast Sonic Boots, a Rank D Green Magic spell that enhanced Agility, on himself beforehand as well.

Given the scarcity of Skill Points, most adventurers preferred to choose a single skill and focus strictly on that. After all, the bonuses and effects gained

from a single high-ranked skill were usually much more powerful than those of several Rank F skills put together. There were indeed adventurers who chose a Rank F-only build, but they were extremely rare.

To the rest of the world, Cashel possessed enough SP to be considered a prodigy. Yet even for someone like him, reaching Rank B was the most that could be achieved. The wall of Rank A was insurmountable. His heart crushed when he had faced this cruel reality, Cashel, who had single-mindedly pursued only Sword Mastery up until then, had turned astray. What later developed into a love of thrill killing had originally been nothing more than a way to earn large amounts of XP for the sake of leveling up. It was also a major motive behind Cashel's current plan to kill Raji and Gimul. But everything had come to nothing in the end, all because of some newcomer he had been foolish enough to underestimate.

"You're a Tamer...wait, no, a Summoner?"

"Yes. I am."

"Hahaha, in all my years as an adventurer, this is the first time I've met one. So that trick just now, that was Summoning? It does indeed seem very useful," nodded Cashel, looking like something had finally fallen into place. "In that case, it seems I can expect quite the windfall of XP from killing you."

"You killed all those people just for the experience points?"

"Well, don't go insulting the idea out of hand. Did you know you get a *lot* more XP from killing humans than from killing monsters? The higher the person's level, the greater the XP gained. In other words, adventurers are the best subjugation targets, period."

"You've never truly fought someone stronger than yourself, have you?"

"What did you say?"

The smile that had remained on Cashel's face the entire time finally fell away.

"You don't want to fight monsters who are stronger, so you've remained in Rank D for the longest time. You don't want to fight humans who are stronger, so you've only targeted newcomers. Am I wrong?"

“Don’t give me your bullshit! I’m not —”

“Honestly, though, whether you were aware of it or not doesn’t really matter. All I know is that I can’t have anybody falling victim to you ever again,” Kelvin replied nonchalantly, raising his staff. “See, if you truly want to get stronger, you have to challenge and defeat those stronger than yourself. If you can’t do that, then you’ll remain a coward and a weakling for the rest of your life.”

“SHUT UP! DON’T YOU DARE DENY ME MY WAY OF LIFE!!!”

As if a fuse had finally blown, Cashel rushed towards Kelvin at top speed, clearly intending to finish the fight with a single blow. With ease, he ducked through Kelvin’s guard like a gust of wind.

“Dodge this if you can! Haze Edge!”

Haze Edge was Cashel’s hidden ace. Achieved by hiding his sword with Concealment and then casting it again on himself right before the moment he struck, this move had always granted the swordsman a sure hit on his target. “Had” being the operative word.

Just as Cashel was about to bring his sword down, a gigantic wall appeared before him, one that almost reached the ceiling of the room.

“A wall?!”

“After everything you said to Raji, I thought it would take a bit more to get a rise out of you, but...”

Out of the many protective spells that existed, Green Magic’s Rank C spell, Earth Rampart, actually ranked quite high in terms of defensive capabilities. Its endurance was equal to or even above that of a normal castle wall. As such, the whole point of Cashel’s move — namely, that it guaranteed him a hit — simply lost all meaning.

“What can a mere wall of dirt do?!”

“Thanks to that wall of dirt, you lost sight of me for a split second.”

“What...?!”

After casting Earth Rampart, Kelvin had not hidden on the other side of the wall, but had instead chosen to move to the same side as Cashel. His

opponent’s attention had been drawn towards the wall, and Kelvin had increased his speed by an order of magnitude thanks to Sonic Boots. Cashel could hardly be faulted for his momentary lapse of focus.

“Who are you?!”

The last thing that Cashel ever saw was a staff clad in a whirling tempest that took on the appearance of a longsword. With a single sweep, the swordsman and the Earth Rampart behind him were both cut cleanly in half. It was thanks to the Rank A Green Magic spell, Vortex Edge, that the fight finally came to a close.

“Hmm, seems there’s only so much I can do without picking up the Sword Mastery skill myself. Guess I should grab it next and get some training in.”

Kelvin (23 y/o, Male, Human, Summoner)

Level: 17

Title: None

HP: 175/175

MP: 350/350

Strength: 38

Endurance: 39

Agility: 106

Magic: 172

Luck: 140

Skills: Summoning (Rank S) [Available slots: 8 (Clotho: 100 MP, Melfina: ? MP)], Green Magic (Rank A), Analyze Eye (Rank S), Presence Sensing (Rank D), Concealment (Rank B), Nerves of Steel (Rank C), Army Command (Rank B), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points, Experience Sharing

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank B)



With the fight against Cashel and his lackeys officially over, I rejoined Clotho.

“You all right, buddy?”

We made our way over to where the last of our attackers, Gimul, was lying prostrate on the ground. He had already breathed his last.

“Seems like Cashel’s sword is the only thing worth keeping. Clotho, go ahead and Absorb the bodies. Oh, and could you take out a few MP potions for me?”

According to Analyze Eye, Cashel had been using a mithril sword, a Rank C weapon. Although it had no special abilities, it was a good, sturdy sword with high attack power. *Let’s have Clotho hold on to it for now.* The Verdant Staff and magic robes that I was wearing were both Rank E. A Rank C weapon was far beyond the purchasing power that completing ten Rank E quests could net me, so it was a bit of a windfall.

While Clotho was busy Absorbing Cashel’s and Gimul’s corpses, I recovered my MP with potions that I’d had Clotho store for me beforehand. The outcome of the fight might have made it seem like a pushover victory, but the reality wasn’t that simple. Yes, we’d managed somehow by provoking each of them in turn and making them lose their cool, but in truth we were quite behind them in stats. It had left us no choice but to rely quite heavily on our skills instead.

::Honey, you said all those things to Cashel, but the fact is, you haven’t fought any truly strong opponents before either.::

“Well, that’s what we’re about to do, right?”

Everything up until this moment has basically been the appetizer. What’s coming now is the main course. I activated Analyze Eye through the heavy door, and sure enough, the Black Spirit Knight, the boss of the Ancient Castle of Evil Spirits, was a monster far superior to us in every way.

Gerard (138 y/o, Male, Black Spirit Knight Captain, Dark Knight)

Level: 53

Title: Patriotic Guardian

HP: 647/647

MP: 162/162

Strength: 478 (+160)

Endurance: 490 (+160)

Agility: 163

Magic: 112

Luck: 97

Skills: Loyalty (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank A), Herculean Strength (Rank B), Iron Wall (Rank B), Mind's Eye (Rank C), Army Command (Rank B), Dark Damage Resistance

“Wow! What can I say? This guy — I really want him as a Follower!”

::Not even a touch of nerves there, honey?::

Melfina's jab aside, my new opponent was a Named Monster, which referred to a unique creature that spawned with an actual name. According to what I'd recently read, Named Monsters possessed actual intelligence, and there were even some who were capable of human speech. The primary representatives of such beings were, of course, the dragons. The book had also noted that, as a general rule, humanoid monsters had an especially high probability of being capable of speech.

::Forming a Contract with a monster with intelligence is not going to be easy. Aside from weakening him, you will also need to make him acknowledge your authority.::

Acknowledge my authority? Guess I should have known things weren't going to be as simple as picking a fight and winning.

::This also applies to Tamers, but the standard practice for them is to nurture a low-level monster and help it to Evolve.::

“Just as Clotho Evolved from a blue slime?”

::Clotho's Evolution was exceptional in several ways, but in general, yes, that's the idea. There is no one who thinks of Contracting with a boss-level enemy right off the bat.::

“Well, there’s no way to know if something is impossible without trying it first.” Here, I turned to my partner in slime. “Clotho, this Black Spirit Knight is going to be our first formidable enemy. Don’t hold anything back.”

I piled buff spells onto Clotho and myself. Thanks to my Magic stat, they would remain effective for quite a while. With our preparations done, I opened the large doors, keeping Clotho behind me. The Black Spirit Knight was in the same position as before, his pitch black greatsword stuck into the ground, holding himself in an imposing stance as if to protect the throne behind him. His unyielding figure had not moved an inch since I’d first seen him, which made him seem like a true knight rather than a monster.

Keeping my eyes on the spirit, I slowly inched forward. I had made it about halfway across the room when a cool, deep voice rang out.

“State your business.”

The gentlemanly sound of it was unexpected and surprised me a little. If I hadn’t had Nerves of Steel, it might have even shown on my face.

“So you do talk! I was getting a bit concerned, seeing as you showed no reaction to my presence up until now.”

“Your concern is unnecessary. There is no way that you wandered here, to the deepest part of this castle, simply because you lost your way. I’ll ask you once again, state your business.”

“I came to kill you...or, at least, that was my original intention. But I’ve changed my mind. I’m Kelvin, a Summoner. I want to take you on as a Follower.”

The Black Spirit Knight froze for a split second.

“You wish to Contract with me? In other words, to make me submit to you?”

“That’s right.”

“Ha—”

Uh-oh. Look at him shaking. Did I piss him off?

“GAH HAH HAH HAH!!”

The dark knight burst into raucous laughter, as if releasing everything that he had been suppressing until then. I was completely dumbfounded.

“Aahaha all right, I’m done, no more of that formal talking, all stiff and upright! How calm you look, brat, despite all the killing intent that I was directing at you! And to top it off, you want to form a Contract with me? You interesting bastard, you!”

Hey, don’t point your finger at me. What the hell happened to your image as a proud, dignified knight?





How did things end up like this? How am I sitting across from a Black Spirit Knight, just shooting the breeze like it's nothing? Well, not really "shooting the breeze," I guess. This guy's just rambling on all by himself.

"It actually wasn't all that long ago that I regained my sapience since becoming a monster. I used to be a knight captain who served this very country. In other words, I was once a human myself. Even I haven't the faintest idea how or why I became a monster, though! Maybe I died with a fierce regret that bound me to this world, who knows! Either way, I don't remember it at all. So in any case, I decided to simply go on protecting this castle. Say, that slime of yours is quite unusual, isn't it? What species is that? Hey, well, there's no need to answer me if you want to keep it a secret. Everyone has a thing or two they want to keep secret, wouldn't you say? Oh, by the way, you want some candy?"

In this way, the Black Spirit Knight continued to rattle on. He had completely turned into a good-natured uncle that I might have bumped into around the neighborhood.

Ugh, how old is this candy?! It's completely melted and all swollen up!

::Please don't think that while still putting it into your mouth, honey::

"Heh, you're seriously going to eat it? Even I wouldn't if I were you."

"I see, so you're looking to pick a fight. You want to bring this outside?!"

I found myself quite drained from the conversation. The only one taking things seriously was Clotho. From its position right next to me, it continued to stay vigilant —

"Look at that slime eating the candy as if it's nothing. Good on you!"

— or so I'd thought until I realized it was actually in the middle of Absorbing a piece of candy. *Et tu, Clotho?*

::Honey, the Contract, the Contract::

"Oh, that's right. So, are you willing to Contract with me?" I asked the Black Spirit Knight once more as he playfully poked at Clotho.

“Ah yes, that was the original topic, wasn’t it. You see, pretty much everyone who comes here rushes at me all gung ho the moment they see me. You’re the first one I’ve had a proper conversation with. Can’t blame me for getting a bit excited, can you? I’m glad that our talk has been so lively and animated.”

“You’re the only one who was lively and animated, dude.”

“I’m not ‘dude.’ My name is Gerard.”

“And I’m not ‘brat.’ I’m Kelvin. As for how to address each other...in any case, we can leave that for after the Contract.”

Gerard abruptly got to his feet and turned towards the throne behind him.

“A Contract...” he mused. “The king that I once served, and even the country itself, none of it remains now. So I’m not completely against serving a new master, but...”

“Earlier in our conversation, you mentioned your choice to continue protecting this castle. Why was that?”

The previously bright and cheerful mood in the room turned heavy and somber in a split second.

“The kingdom I once served, which no longer exists, was called Alcahl. It was by no means a large country, but it was a place with fertile, green fields that yielded bountiful harvests. Our king hated war, always choosing to maintain a neutral position whenever it broke out elsewhere.”

In this world, there were two main continents: one in the east and one in the west. Parth was pretty much located at the dead center of the Eastern Continent. The Ancient Castle of Evil Spirits was right next to it.

“I was the captain of a rural order of knights. Although our country was never at war, monsters still appeared, as they do everywhere. Subjugating those monsters made up a large part of my order’s duties. We trained ourselves no less than any other order in the kingdom, so that we’d be ready in case war ever did break out.” Gerard tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword. “On that fateful day, a traveler supposedly hailing from the Western Continent came to Alcahl. We later learned that he was actually a general from the Rizean Empire. His name was Jildora, and he was the one who unleashed a deadly pestilence

throughout our country.”

“Deadly pestilence?”

“I don’t know all the details, but I heard that once someone caught it, they would gradually lose their life force. It was a terrifying disease that could kill those afflicted within a night. The pestilence spread in the blink of an eye. Only days later, all of our neighboring countries had closed their borders to us. There were eyewitness reports of Jildora being out and about in the dead of night several days after he’d arrived. In all likelihood, that was when he struck.”

“Hold on just a moment. That’s hardly enough to prove this guy was the one responsible, right? In the first place, how did you even know he was a general of the Rizean Empire?”

“The day before the pestilence struck, Jildora appeared here, in this castle. We had no idea how he managed to get in, but before we knew it, he was already there in front of our king. He said to him, ‘Help us destroy the Holy Empire of Deramis, or your country will not see the next sunrise.’”

The Holy Empire of Deramis...that’s the place Melfina said she transmigrated this era’s Heroes to...

“Naturally, our king turned him down...and the rest was as I told you.”

I couldn’t see Gerard’s face behind the visor, but the rage radiating from him was so palpable that I could feel it on my skin.

“I said earlier that I don’t remember the regret that bound me to this world, but that was a lie. My greatest desire is to avenge the people of my country. If you would help me to achieve that, I would gladly serve under you.”

So that’s his condition for joining me, then. Uh, wait a second...

“Hold on, you died several decades ago, right? Judging from the state of this castle, I might venture a guess that it was more than a hundred years ago, even. Wouldn’t this Jildora character be long dead by now?”

“He was an elf, and elves have lifespans of more than five hundred years. I’m sure he hasn’t died yet, not in a measly hundred years.”

“An elf...” *The same race as the slave girl from the other day.* “So, this is your

only condition?”

“I’ve heard that Summoners boost their Followers’ stats. Your offer sounds like a godsend for me and my quest. However, I need to see how strong you yourself are beforehand.”

“Well, can’t say I didn’t see this coming.”

When all’s said and done, it still boils down to duking it out and gaining his loyalty through a show of power. Not a problem at all. It’s what I’ve been expecting this whole time.

“If you can’t win against me, then opposing the Rizean Empire would most certainly be impossible for you. If you don’t have the strength, your only future is to die upon my blade!”

Both Gerard and I backed up.

“Sounds perfect to me. There’s no point unless we both go all out, so come at me with everything you have!”



From the position that I had fallen back to, I wasted no time in sending an order to Clotho through the Follower Network.

“As a knight, shouldn’t you have charged at me straight away instead of backing up?”

“Hmph, wasn’t that distance just now disadvantageous for you?”

“Wow, thanks for your consideration.”

I threw Wind Shot, the shotgun version of Wind, at Gerard as an opening move. The idea was that a blanket attack, rather than a precision one, would be harder to avoid. Several blades of wind split into several dozen more while approaching the knight, but a single sweep of his greatsword repelled them all. The blades of wind that had been diverted from their original trajectories ended up ripping apart the ceiling, walls, and ground instead.

Taking advantage of the moment Gerard was occupied, Clotho shot out four tentacles from a position diagonally behind him. It was the same attack that Raji had been entirely powerless against, further enhanced by an Agility boost from

the Sonic Boots spell.

“Hmph!”

“What?!”

My jaw dropped in astonishment. Gerard had taken two of the tentacles head on, then used his left hand to grab the third one and stomped the last one into the ground with his right foot. With that, he had fully captured Clotho, who couldn't break free due to their significant difference in Strength.

Does this guy have eyes in the back of his head or what?!

::Gerard possesses the Mind's Eye skill. Think of it as something that enhances his situational awareness and reflexes.::

So half-assed attacks aren't going to work against him? That's annoying. But right now, Clotho is in danger. Buddy, I'm going to cast an Earth Rampart separating you from him!

After giving Clotho a heads-up through the Follower Network, I materialized an Earth Rampart just as I'd said I would. The tentacles restrained by Gerard were instantly severed, but as long as Clotho's core was unharmed, it didn't matter. Furthermore —

Go for it!

The parts of Clotho that remained in Gerard's possession began to move all on their own, tightly wrapping around the hand and foot that had been holding them. In a split second, they were enveloped in a red light, and then exploded. After defeating Raji, Clotho had leveled up, consequently earning enough SP to acquire Division, a skill that enabled the slime to remotely control unattached pieces of itself at will. The severed parts still had access to Clotho's Storage, which meant they could be triggered to self-detonate by a bit of the slime's stored-up magic.

“Hah, that slime of yours sure has a large bag of tricks. The moment I grabbed it, I felt it sucking up my magic. And now this self-destructive attack...makes it hard for me to get close.”

In spite of Gerard's grumbling, I got the impression that he was having fun,

although I couldn't see his face behind the visor. His black gauntlet was a little bent from Clotho's explosion, but it was far from enough to affect his sword-wielding abilities.

"As thanks for showing me something interesting, how about I show you my swordsmanship too?"

Gerard lifted his greatsword above his head before bringing it down in my direction.

What was that bullshit about showing me his sword? It's almost as tall as he is and yet he swung it so fast I couldn't see jack!

::Jump to the side RIGHT NOW!::

Hearing the uncharacteristic alarm in Melfina's voice, I immediately leaped sideways. A sharp, heavy *thud* rang out a split second later.

"You serious...?!"

The ground where I had been standing only an instant before had been split open. *That bastard sent a flying slice from his sword?!*

"Impressive! To dodge Agito the first time you see it, you really are good!"

"It's invisible *and* at that speed? You've gotta be kidding me!"

I had managed to evade Gerard's attack in the nick of time, but if I hadn't, I would've been cloven in two. *Thanks for watching out for me, Melfina.*

Before my opponent had time to make his next move, I cast Cleft Chasm. With Gerard at the center, cracks ran swiftly through the floor until the ground suddenly collapsed beneath him. Even the powerful knight proved incapable of maintaining his footing as the earth itself gave way. However, I could see the razor sharp eyes behind the slits in his visor still focused steadily on me.

In that brief instant, although struggling to maintain his footing, Gerard threw out another invisible flying slice attack — not at me, but at where he thought Clotho was located behind the Earth Rampart.

Are you kidding? He managed that even while totally off balance?

Like a knife cutting through butter, Gerard's attack slashed through the Earth

Rampart like it was nothing, with such force that it left a mark on the far side of the room.

“The slime’s gone?!” exclaimed Gerard at the same moment that a sword stabbed up through the collapsed floor and pierced his abdomen. It was the mithril sword that had previously belonged to Cashel. Clotho had slipped through the cracks in the ground with its malleable body, then taken the sword out of Storage and shot it out.

“Ugh...”

Despite Gerard possessing Mind’s Eye, the attack had come from a blind spot and was so completely unexpected that it successfully caught him by surprise. At almost the same time, Clotho also shot three spears at Gerard’s chest, which it had formed by compacting a significant part of its own body.

The knight managed to deflect Clotho’s followup attack, brandishing his sword with almost god-like speed. Clotho, his attack foiled, ended up being the one who took damage from the exchange.

He really is amazing, I marveled. We had disrupted his footing, launched surprise attacks at him, and caught him off guard. And yet, he had managed to handle almost everything we’d thrown at him. However —

“This is checkmate!” I yelled.

Having overextended himself with the counterattack, Gerard was finally left defenseless. I poured every last drop of my remaining MP into an Air Pressure cast.

“Wha—?!”

A column of air came from above and crashed down onto the knight with several dozen times his own weight, rendering him completely immobile. The mithril sword that was still stuck in his abdomen did him no favors either. Just the achievement of having successfully parried Clotho’s followup attacks was already worthy of commendation.

Clotho, shoot him with your entire stock of magic!

Clotho’s body instantly shapeshifted into what looked like a dragon’s gaping

maw. Then the most powerful attack that it was capable of was unleashed.

MORTALITY BEAM.

The ray of energy that erupted from Clotho's open mouth pierced through Gerard, pulverized the ancient castle walls, and disappeared somewhere into the distant skies.





“We confirm that this is indeed a piece of a Black Spirit Knight’s armor. With this, your quest is now completed!”

I was back in Parth’s Adventurer’s Guild, reporting on the Black Spirit Knight subjugation quest. I had just handed Ange-san a piece of what had been left of Gerard’s shattered armor. Clotho’s Mortality Beam had ended up pulverizing the knight, and I had lost my chance to Contract with him.

::My king, this girl is quite the looker. Is she one of your concubine candidates?::

Okay, no, I lied. The Contract had been established without a hitch. That was great and all, but then Gerard had started calling me “king.” I strongly protested that form of address, but apparently he had made up his mind and wasn’t going to yield.

::Isn’t it common sense that a knight can only serve a king? You’ve become my master now, so the title is only natural.::

Seriously, man. At the very least, please refrain from calling me that in public, all right?

“You don’t know how very relieved I am that you’ve returned safe and sound! When you proposed that competition to Cashel-san, I was convinced that you were never coming back. You even managed to defeat the Black Spirit Knight on top of it all! Every day is so full of surprises and fun when you’re around, Kelvin-san!”

Ange-san was rejoicing at my return even while wiping away tears, apparently having been truly worried for my wellbeing. I had already made my report to the guild about how Cashel and his buddies had been targeting and killing new adventurers as a way of earning XP. Instead of being punished for killing them, I was thanked profusely instead. Apparently, this world’s views regarding the harming and killing of criminals were much looser than those of my previous one.

::But still, it seems I can’t underestimate you, my king. To make moves on another girl in front of your fiancée....::

::Hear, hear! Honey, how could you, when you already have me?::

We're not engaged! You're just using me as an excuse to skip work, remember? Okay, seriously, how are you managing to whistle nonchalantly inside my head?!

"So, about the reward for this quest, apparently the guildmaster wants to hand it to you personally. Please head up to his office on the second floor."

"The guildmaster? I don't think I've met him before. Why the special arrangement this time?"

I'd been in Parth for over a week and had dropped by the guild every day without fail, but I'd yet to meet anyone who fit the bill. The second floor was staff-only access, after all.

"This Black Spirit Knight subjugation was far more difficult than the Rank D classification we assigned to it. As you, a Rank E adventurer, completed the quest, you will be granted the opportunity to skip ranks as a special exception, and will also receive an extra bonus from the guildmaster himself."

Ange-san's words elicited an animated "Ooooooh!" from the other adventurers nearby. Before I knew it, even the ones in the bar had turned their attention my way.

"Although the achievement of defeating the Black Spirit Knight is indeed impressive, it seems that it was your feat of exposing Cashel that's caused you to suddenly become famous among the members of this guild."

Other adventurers pressed towards me, each offering words of appreciation or congratulations.

"Thanks to you, it feels like a load's been lifted off my chest. I'd been pissed off by that bastard Cashel for the longest time!"

"Look at how much of a name you've made for yourself in only a week! Let's grab a drink sometime; I'd love to hear your secret to success!"

"Sniff...the Black Spirit Knight killed one of my companions. Thank you for avenging her..."

Being showered with praise certainly felt good, but seeing as the Black Spirit

Knight in question was currently inside my head, it was hard to accept all the thanks being thrown my way.

::Please cut me a break, my king! I still hadn't regained my sapience back then!::

A small part of me was doubtful, but I decided to look at things from Gerard's perspective. It wasn't like he could just stand still and not retaliate against adventurers who'd come specifically to kill him. To his credit, Gerard had done nothing to me until I had entered and made it halfway across the room.

"By the way, man, how did you defeat Cashel? He was Rank D, but his strength was more like C, or maybe even a low B, wasn't it?" asked one of the adventurers out of the blue. Cashel and his lackeys had been free to do as they pleased, in spite of being obvious criminals, simply because they had been the most powerful people in all of Parth. No one could lay a hand on them.

"Luck was just on my side," I replied evasively. After handling the other adventurers for a while, I eventually slipped away and headed up to the second floor.



Knock, knock.

I heard a "come in" from the other side of the door in response.

"Excuse me."

When I stepped into the room, an older man, who seemed the perfect gentleman, welcomed me from the seat behind his desk.

"Welcome, welcome. So you're this Kelvin-kun that I've heard so much about."

"Yes, I am. What a pleasure it is to finally meet you."

"Ah, where are my manners. I am Rio, guildmaster of the Parth branch of the Adventurer's Guild."

Raising a hand to his monocle, the man who introduced himself as Rio had a kind-looking face that gave off the impression of a good-natured grandfather. I returned the greeting in a polite manner, but was actually quite flustered

inside.

Ahh, I'm definitely busted. Shiiiiit, the jig's up.

I all but threw up my hands internally. The reason for my sudden dismay was a certain skill that I had seen when using Analyze Eye on Rio a moment before: Analyze Eye (Rank A).

For the first time since I'd come to this world, my stats were fully exposed.



"What wonderful weather we're having today. Isn't it perfect adventuring weather for you?"

"Oh, I couldn't agree more. In fact, I really want to be out adventuring right this moment."

"Hahaha, being passionate about your work is good and all, but sometimes slowing down and getting some rest will do wonders for your body."

I snickered. "Weren't you the one who brought up this topic, guildmaster?"

The content of our conversation might have sounded quite normal, but the atmosphere in the room was anything but. If Ange-san had made the mistake of walking in at that very moment, she would have surely felt the tension of a nonverbal grappling match thinly veiled by amicable small talk.

"Oh dear, you got me there. So, are you an otherworlder, Kelvin-kun?"

Look at this crafty old raccoon dog slipping a heavy question into the conversation like it's nothing.

I had already revealed my identity to Clotho and Gerard beforehand. Although rare, otherworlders weren't entirely unheard of in this world. Gerard said that he himself had met a few back when he was still alive. The most well-known example would be the group of four pretty boys and girls that Melfina had recently transmigrated as Heroes. *If I ever have the chance, it might be interesting to take a peek at them.*

After several rounds of maneuvering back and forth through various undertones and double meanings, I was left quite exhausted. The original purpose of me going upstairs had been to receive a reward, but instead I'd

ended up in a bit of a bind. I cursed this unlucky day. It was only thanks to Nerves of Steel that I had been able to maintain a poker face the entire time. Otherwise, my expression might have given everything away at the start.

“Isn’t it against convention to probe into an adventurer’s personal details?”

“So you aren’t denying it?”

What is this guy’s aim?

Seeing that my guard was up, Rio exhaled softly. “I apologize, that was a rather rude method of questioning.”

“I can’t really say ‘don’t worry about it,’ but I’d love to know the intention behind your questions.”

Rio took out a cloth from his chest pocket and began to polish his monocle. “Ange-kun has already reported to me on the matter regarding Cashel. From what I’ve heard, you then went on to defeat the Black Spirit Knight by yourself, correct? Or, no, to be exact, you did so with your Followers? You are a Summoner, yes?”

“So you *did* see my Status. What is it you want, exactly?”

“Let me say this right off the bat: I have no intention of becoming your enemy. I would appreciate it if you would listen to what I have to say without that misunderstanding. I want to form a cooperative relationship with you, if you’re willing.”

“Hmm...tell me more.”

Rio invited me to take a seat and I complied.

“Let me start by explaining how I came to the conclusion that you are an otherworlder. You also possess Analyze Eye, so I assume you already know this, but I possess Analyze Eye at Rank A. By the way, it was actually three days ago that I took a peek at your Status. Ange-kun mentioned to me that a very promising newcomer had shown up, so I took the liberty of confirming from the shadows.”

Three whole days ago? The skills that I saw out on the streets were Rank C at best, so I thought I’d be safe enough raising Concealment to Rank B. Who

would've thought I'd be found out in such a short time? Doing things half-heartedly really is my worst weakness, isn't it?

::My king, please pull yourself together! Your Status would have been exposed eventually; it's hardly something that can be concealed forever. What's more important is to find comrades with whom you can share your secrets.::

::We will also do everything in our power to support you as best we can.::

I...suppose that's true. Well, might as well listen to what Rio's got to say. I really am blessed with wonderful Followers.

"When I saw your Status, many questions arose. Primarily, the issue of your level being extremely mismatched with your class and the rank that your skills were at. Even the greatest of prodigies couldn't pick up Summoning at your level, let alone so many other skills on top of that. The only possible explanation was that you hailed from another world and arrived here already in possession of those skills at Level 1. Kelvin-kun, you need to realize that your stats are on par with Rank S adventurers over here."

::What he says is correct.::

In that case, I suppose there's no point in keeping up the facade any longer.

"As you surmised, yes, I am an otherworlder. From the sound of it, you've met others like me in the past?"

"I was there when the Holy Empire of Deramis summoned their Heroes not long ago."

Deramis and the Heroes again. Melfina seemed quite reluctant for me to get involved with them, though.

"Did you know all along that Cashel and his flunkies were criminals? Why did you let them get away with it?"

"In regards to that, I owe you an apology. Cashel was a noble, a member of the Fahze family from the country of Trycen. There is a lot of red tape when it comes to handling foreign nobility. I was in the process of gathering the necessary evidence to do something about him."

Cashel was a noble? Well, with that appearance, I suppose I can see it. I guess

nobles have a lot of authority in this world.

“At least, that’s what I *had* been doing until, just the other day, I received news that he’d been disinherited because of some problem that he’d caused. Perhaps his title had something to do with it. In any case, I was about to make my move when you appeared, Kelvin-kun.”

What wonderful timing I chose, huh?

“Naturally, if you had been a normal, run-of-the-mill newcomer, I would have stopped you from facing off with him. However, your Status was...well, it was what it was. So I bet on you being able to pull it off.”

“What would you have done if your bet had been wrong and I’d ended up dead?”

“Ahaha, sorry.”

This damn raccoon dog. His gentlemanly demeanor is totally a front!

“Come now, please don’t make that face. As recompense, here, I am padding your reward with a bonus, and I’m sure you’re also going to like the terms that I’m offering.”

“That’s the ‘cooperative relationship’ part that you mentioned earlier? Let me hear the specifics, then.”

“The Oracle of Deramis was sent a prophecy, based on which she decided to carry out the Hero-summoning Ritual. According to the Oracle, the Demon Lord’s resurrection is near. It’s hard to tell if the two are related or not, but monsters all over the continent have been growing increasingly more ferocious of late.”

“So...?”

“I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but the Black Spirit Knight that you fought was much more powerful than it was supposed to be. Whatever it is that’s happening to all the monsters, I suspect it happened to that one as well. This *should* have been a Rank D quest, but the number of casualties was far too high. The trouble is, no matter how powerful these newly summoned Heroes are, they can’t very well run all over the continent, protecting everyone from

powered-up creatures like these. Above all, we need them to focus on their biggest responsibility: the Demon Lord.”

Aha, I think I’m beginning to see where Rio’s going with this.

“You want me to address the threat that overpowered monsters pose to this city in place of the Heroes, right?”

“Much to my chagrin, even our guild is short on fighting power. We might not have a single high-ranked adventurer in this entire area. We are always desperately in need of those who can take on Rank B quests or higher.”

The area around Parth was generally peaceful, with most monsters being fairly low level. That was likely the main reason no high-ranking adventurers stayed long-term. Cashel and his merry friends had been the strongest in town, after all. The sudden appearance of such a powerful monster in the Ancient Castle of Evil Spirits, so close to Parth, must have left Rio in quite a predicament.

“In short, I want you to take on the quests that other adventurers in our branch cannot handle. You will be paid the appropriate fees, and the guild will provide you with as much support as it can. Of course, if you consider a quest beyond your capabilities, you are free to decline it. To be blunt, I’m thinking that it would be a terrible waste to let someone as talented as you remain in the lower ranks.”

“In other words, you will raise my adventurer rank as a special exception, but I will retain full rights to accept or decline whatever quest I want?”

“That’s exactly right.”

“Forgive *my* bluntness, but those terms sound too good to be true.”

“Honestly? A Summoner like yourself would be welcomed with open arms and given the greatest reception no matter where you went. It’s the same for the Adventurer’s Guild. We are hoping to have you rise up quickly in our ranks as an outward display of your association with us before you get pulled away by anyone else,” Rio explained apologetically. “As I’ve done so far, I will keep your abilities and otherworldly origins a secret. If you agree to work with us, I will guarantee your freedom. You need a shield to protect you from getting caught

up in the tedious power struggles of the nobility, don't you?"

He's already seen through me that far? Well, if those are the terms, I have no reason to refuse.

"Very well, I accept. Let's work together from here on out."

Both Rio and I stood up, sealing the deal with a firm handshake.



After the discussion with Rio, I returned to the Fairy's Song. Long story short, my adventurer rank was raised to B. Apparently, there's normally a test involved, but the application was pushed through based on my victory against Cashel, aided by Rio's recommendation as a guildmaster. *Belying his appearance, that raccoon dog really can be quite aggressive.* I also received a jaw-dropping amount of money as the quest completion reward. *Seriously, how many adventurers did you repel, Gerard?*

"I've heard the news, Kelvin-chan. Congratulations on being promoted to Rank B!"

Clare-san's already heard? Wow, you really can't underestimate the housewives' information network in any world.

For the week that I'd been in Parth, I had been staying at the Fairy's Song. Ange-san's recommendation had been spot-on; it was a great inn. Most importantly, the food there was delicious.

"The news spread so fast? Who did you hear it from?"

"It's all the buzz among the adventurers right now. The younger generation makes up a large part of our clientele, so it would be difficult not to have caught wind of it."

"Personally, I'd rather do without all the attention..."

"What are you saying? I've run this inn for ages and even I haven't heard of anyone else managing to rise up to Rank B in only a week. How can someone like that not stand out?"

I know, right.

“Oh, Clare-san. When I come back in the evening tonight, could you prepare two portions of dinner for me?”

“I don’t mind at all. What is it, will you be bringing a friend over?”

“Something like that.”

“All right, you got it. And as a celebration, I’ll throw in one more dish for free! Take it as our wish for you to reach greater and greater heights in the future!”

“You’re the best, Clare-san!”

Having successfully secured myself an extravagant dinner, I proceeded up to my room.

::Are you heading out?: asked Gerard as I was in the middle of withdrawing funds from the Bank of Clotho, having changed from my magic robe into casual wear.

“Yep, I’m thinking of going to pick up a slave.”

::Ah...yes, of course, this is something normal for all men! I support your decision, my king!::

“Are you misunderstanding something?”

This world had a slave system. There were many ways that someone could fall into slavery, including being unable to repay a loan, being sold off by one’s parents, or being kidnapped and sold off. The young girls that I had seen on the streets before had probably experienced something along those lines. Slaves were forced to wear a Slave Collar, a magical item that caused effects not unlike that of a curse. When a slave was purchased, the new master had to use his or her own blood to touch the slave’s collar and a unique spell had to be chanted. When the process was finished, the slave would be unable to harm his or her new master.

Unless there was a legitimate reason, it was forbidden for other people to harm someone’s slave, as they were considered their master’s personal property. Even nobles would be severely punished for such an infraction, and it was the same across both continents. On the other hand, a slave’s status as property also meant that their masters were completely free to treat them

however they liked. All things considered, the general treatment of slaves leaned strongly towards the inhumane side.

::You're thinking of training that slave as a party member, eh?::

"Oh right, I discussed this with Melfina before."

Those who had been slaves since birth had all their Talent Points left untouched. Due to the Curse of Submission, they were unable to use any Skill Points without express permission from a master. In this way, masters had complete freedom in distributing newly bought slaves' Skill Points.

"We were quite hard-pressed in our fight against Gerard. If we are to continue facing opponents of a similar level going forward, I think it would be a good idea to increase our fighting power, no matter how little it may be at the start."

::That makes sense. So, my king, is it going to be a female slave?::

"Do you even have to ask?" *Why the hell would I ever want a guy as a slave?*

::.....::

Melfina's pointed silence was painful, but this was something that I wasn't going to compromise on. *I'm sure this is a dream that all men share!*

Gerard expressed his approval with an enthusiastic ::I get you, my king! I get you!:: even while thinking, *Ah, so he does have those intentions after all.*

In any case, since I had gained my knight's vote of support, this made it a three-versus-one majority. Clotho? Clotho always took my side on everything.

All right then, let's go!



The merchant took me around the store to tour his wares. By wares, I mean his slaves, of course.

"What do you think of this beastkin girl, sir? She's become a slave only recently, so unfortunately she's used up her Skill Points already. However, the skills that she possesses are battle-oriented, so I'm sure she'd prove quite useful!"

Upon being introduced to a rather cute beastkin, I activated Analyze Eye. It was true that she possessed Pugilism and Herculean Strength. However...

“She’s not bad, but I would still prefer one who hasn’t used any Skill Points yet.”

“If that’s the case, let me see, hmm...”

As the slave merchant paused in thought, my eyes casually drifted to a corner of the room, where I saw an elf inside a cage. Her hair seemed to be a dull yellow, but it was clearly very dirty. The outfit that she was wearing was also of poorer quality than what the other slaves had on. Upon closer inspection, I realized that her ears were a bit short, so it was likely that she was a half-elf rather than a full-blooded one. For some reason, her hands were clasped in irons.

Why hasn’t the store owner introduced her yet?

Curious, I activated Analyze Eye. “Huh...?! Excuse me, what can you tell me about that elf?”

“I’m sorry? Oh, you’re referring to that one, sir? She’s actually a half-elf. I got her just the other day, but she turned out to be cursed. Everything that she touches gets burned up, which means she can’t hold a bow, nor can she be used for fun. I called a renowned Priest to dispel her curse, but it didn’t work. To be honest with you, no one would buy her, so I’m not sure what to do with her. I want to beat up my past self for getting carried away thinking I could sell her for a hefty sum.”

Ahh, no wonder I thought this slave merchant looked familiar. He was the one I spotted before on the side of the road. Which means that this half-elf —

I approached the cage to confirm my guess. I hadn’t noticed it earlier because her bangs were covering her face, but there was no mistaking those eyes. There was no doubt that this was indeed the girl with whom I had locked eyes before.

::Melfina, what would I need to dispel her curse?::

::Her symptoms sound like the effects from the Curse of the Flame Dragon King. White Magic’s Rank A Sacred Bless should do the trick::

For that, the Skill Points I would need...great, I have enough.

“Could you sell this girl to me?”

“Of course, I would be delighted to, but sir, are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

The slave merchant removed the half-elf’s cuffs, then prompted her to step out.

“Come on out. You have a buyer.”

“Huh...?”

The fact that anyone wanted to buy her apparently came as a surprise to the girl too. She stepped out of her cage, revealing a gaunt body, disheveled hair, and...well, rather sizable breasts. Her face was still hidden behind her bangs, but even so, her beauty shone through. Elves were well-known throughout the world for their beauty. Apparently, half-elves were no exception.

“I’ll perform the contractual ritual now.”

The merchant offered a handkerchief for me to drop a bit of blood onto, then pressed the handkerchief against the slave’s collar while chanting a spell.

“With this, the transaction has been completed. Please be forewarned that we will not take responsibility for anything that happens as a result of her curse.”

“Not a problem.”

I turned to the half-elf.

“U-Umm, th-thank you for buying me, M-Master. M-My name is Efil.”

“I’m Kelvin. Nice to meet you!”

“P-Please take c-care of me...”

It was clear that Efil was very nervous.

“U-Um, my, uh, I have a c-curse...”

“Before anything else, let’s not bother the merchant any longer.”

I led Efil out of the store and into an empty alleyway. Her face turned darker

and darker with every step.

“U-Umm...”

“Well then, how about we dispel that nasty curse of yours?”

“Uh...I’m sorry?”

I had raised White Magic to Rank A on the way, and I also had more than enough MP in the tank. All that was left was to chant the spell. So without any further ado, I cast Sacred Bless. A faint white light gathered around Efil’s hands before gradually dissipating into tiny glimmers and slowly fading away.

“There you go; your curse has been lifted.” As a test, I grabbed Efil’s hands. *Yep, as soft as I’d expected.*

“No, be care—ful?! Wh...*how?*”

Efil turned her disbelieving face towards me. Then...

“Waaaaaahhhhhhh!”

She burst into tears.



“You feeling calmer now?” I asked, holding Efil in one arm and patting her head with my other. She was about a head shorter than my 170 cm, which made the top of her head the perfect height for patting.

It had all started when I dispelled the Curse of the Flame Dragon King for her. Efil had immediately started bawling. I’d been caught completely off guard, thoroughly at a loss as to what to do, when she’d buried her head in my chest. That was how I had ended up comforting her until she’d stopped crying. *What’s that touching me? No, I must not pay it any mind. If I do, I’d be a failure as a human being.*

“...Hic...uuu...”

While still patting Efil’s head, I cast the Rank E Green Magic spell Clean on her. It was a spell that could clean someone up, effectively providing the same effect as taking a bath, only without the sense of refreshment. Although it was indeed convenient, I would still choose a bath any day, given the choice.

Due to her less than ideal treatment at the slave merchant's, Efil had been covered in dirt and grime. There was no way I could have left her in such a state. *There we go, now your hair's finally all pretty and spotless.*

After her sobbing had ceased, Efil immediately backed off. "I'm sorry for crying like that. I've...never touched anyone in my entire life before."

"Because of the curse?"

"Yes. I could touch my own skin without any problems, but anything else would immediately go up in flames..." Tears started welling up in her eyes again. *I can't even imagine how lonely it must have made her feel.*

"How long have you been a slave?"

"As long as I can remember. I don't have any memories of my parents at all, but I heard that they sold me off as soon as I was born."

"I see. Things have been really tough for you, haven't they?"

I may not know what hardships and suffering Efil has lived through so far. But what I do know is that I will never let her go through anything like that again.

"Efil, I'm an adventurer. I want to train you up to join my party. If you don't like the idea, I'm completely open to exploring other paths, though. What would you prefer to do?"

"Master, I want to do whatever will help you most. If that is being an adventurer beside you, then I want to do that!" replied Efil without missing a beat, looking straight into my eyes.

"All right, I hear you loud and clear. Thank you. In that case, consider this an official welcome to my party!"

I held out my hand and Efil grabbed it with both of hers. "I'll do my best!"



"Clare-san, I'm back!" I called out as I returned to the Fairy's Song with Efil in tow. The motherly innkeeper came out almost immediately.

"Welcome ba— What's with the girl?!"

Clare-san rushed over to the half-elf. In spite of my having cast Clean on her,

Efil's clothes were still ragged and beaten up. It was understandable that Clare-san, who loved taking care of others, would be unable to overlook it.

"I bought her at a slave merchant's place. Her name is Efil. Efil, this is Clare-san."

Efil lowered her head shyly in greeting.

"Clare-san, would you happen to have any clothes that Efil could wear? I'm sorry to bother you with this, but all the clothing stores are closed now, so I didn't know who else to ask..."

"I see you're as spacey as ever, Kel-chan. But you've come to the right person! Efil-chan, come with me. Feel free to take your pick of any of the clothes in this room!"

It hurt a bit being called spacey, but I managed to recover somehow. With nothing else to do, I decided to take a seat and wait until they were done.



"They sure are taking a while," I murmured after waiting for half an hour. Fortunately, the restaurant was being handled by other staff members, and they were managing just fine without Clare-san. *Still, what could be taking so long?*

::My king, women simply require a lot of time to get ready::

::Honey, how about you use this opportunity to consider her skill build?::

Another fifteen minutes went by before Clare-san finally — with a cheery "Thanks for waiting!" — burst through the doors. "Efil-chan, dazzle your master with your new look!"

"O-Okay!"

Efil timidly revealed herself.

Honestly, I almost mistook her for someone else. The bangs that had been hiding her face were now trimmed away, and the golden blond hair that reached her waist was tied up neatly behind the nape of her neck. My first impression upon seeing her face properly was that it had the perfect ratio of cuteness and beauty, giving her a dignified and almost royal appearance. Her

characteristically elven skin was porcelain white, smooth without blemishes and entirely exquisite. It was only then that my mind truly registered the fact that Efil was, without a doubt, absolutely stunning. Her reserved and slightly embarrassed posture was simply icing on an already perfect cake.

“H-How does it look?”

A blushing face and upturned eyes?! Oh god, I'm feeling lightheaded.

“U-Um, Master?”

“R-Right, sorry about that.” Still completely out of it, I ended up blurting out my inner thoughts. “My mind actually blanked out for a moment because you're just so cute.”

“Th-Thank you very much!”

Ah, she bit herself. Efil's slightly blushing skin turned an even brighter shade of red. *Oh god, this girl. I just can't.* Even with support from Nerves of Steel, I didn't think I could stand it any longer.

In addition, there was a burning question in my mind.

“So...why the maid uniform?” *I mean, personally, I completely approve.*

“Oh, that was something she decided on pretty much from the start. To my surprise, this outfit that my daughter used to wear while helping to draw in customers turned out to be a perfect fit! After she laid eyes on it, Efil-chan flat out refused to look at any other clothes.”

“I was taught that this is the outfit to wear when serving a master, so...”

Mr. Slave Merchant, job well done! That aside, Clare-san's daughter must be a genius to have come up with the idea of wearing this to draw in customers. Seems like the inn's future is bright!

“But Efil-chan, you'll be a part of Kel-chan's party going forward, right? Are you sure you don't want something that's easier to move around in?”

“I have a great idea for that. Could we borrow this outfit for a while?” *I can't very well allow her to take it off!*

“My daughter's grown out of it by now, so I'll just give it to Efil-chan. There

are a few more sets of the same outfit, so take those too.”

“Thank you very much, Clare-san!”

“Don’t worry about it. I got the chance to dress up Efil-chan so nicely, I’ve already received my payment!”

What a big heart Clare-san has! Well then, there’s still a bit of time before dinner, so I guess we’ll head up to my — I mean, our room first...

“Oh right, I’ve got to change rooms. Clare-san, could we switch to a two-person room?”

“They’re all fully booked today. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to make do for tonight.”

Hold on, but there’s only one bed in our room. That’s going to be a problem.

“Please don’t worry, Master, I will sleep on the floor.”

“Efil, you sleep on the bed. I’ll take the floor.”

This was something that I had no intention of debating. *Only a shithole of a man would let a girl sleep on the floor while hogging the bed.* However, with neither of us conceding, we were stuck at an impasse.

“Just sleep together on the bed. Efil-chan is your slave, right? There’s no problem then,” interjected Clare-san with a “what are you guys even bickering for” expression. *How can she not realize the enormity of what she just said?*

Efil and I couldn’t help but exchange looks. However, unable to come up with a solution, we decided to postpone the matter and head up to our room for the time being.



Upon entering the room, I sat on the bed and Efil took the chair. Before we did anything else, I decided to explain the present situation to her.

“So...I guess I should bring you up to speed on everything. My class is Summoner. Have you heard of it before?”

“Umm, I’m afraid not...” *Right, not surprising considering she’s pretty much spent her whole life locked away. The best approach is to have her learn things a*

bit at a time.

“Well, it allows me to do *this*,” I said, Summoning Clotho and Gerard to my left and right, respectively.

“Fair day to you, young lady. I am Gerard, one of Kelvin’s Followers.”

“Whaa?! Master, a monster and a person suddenly showed up out of nowhere!”

Gerard had offered quite a knightly greeting, but Efil was so surprised that she clearly hadn’t heard it. *Don’t let it get you down, dude.*

“Efil, take a deep breath and calm down. I’ll explain everything.”

And so, I began to tell Efil about Summoning, my Followers, and our path going forward.



“And that’s why I want my being a Summoner to stay as much of a secret as possible.”

Efil looked deeply impressed. “Master is an even more amazing person than I had imagined!” she said, before nodding in acquiescence. “Gerard-san, Clotho-chan, I apologize for my reaction earlier.”

Gerard gave her a jovial laugh. “Give it no further thought!”

Clotho was assuming its pre-Evolution size, sitting in Efil’s lap and letting her pet it to her heart’s content. *I’m glad to see that she’s fitting in well.*

“There’s actually one more Follower, a goddess named Melfina. However, I’m not strong enough to Summon her yet. When the time comes, I’ll introduce you two.”

“A g-goddess?! Yes, please, I’ll look forward to it!”

::I am also looking forward to it::

Although Efil couldn’t hear her, Melfina’s tone was extremely gentle. Apparently, she had taken a liking to this pure and innocent girl.

“Now then, Efil, about your skill selection...”

“The matter you just explained, right? I will leave everything to Master’s discretion.”

“No, after you take the two skills that I tell you to, I want you to choose the rest yourself.”

This was something that I had discussed with Melfina and Gerard earlier. Since Efil had never had the opportunity to make any of her own decisions, we wanted to grant her the chance to do so now.

“Huh? But Master, I don’t know anything about skills. It’d all go to waste if I picked them.”

“Just think long and hard about it, then decide what feels right to you.”

There were so many skills in this world that they could fill an encyclopedia. Knowing all of them offhand was simply impossible. Therefore, the best approach was to search for skills by thinking of keywords and browsing through the results. However, residents of this world had apparently found even that to be too much trouble, and had a strong tendency to pick up the same old skills that were already known to have a wide range of uses. With how limited Skill Points were, one could hardly blame them for sticking with the tried and true options.

“Think about it...”

“We are in no hurry. Take all the time you need.”

This is the right thing to do. I’m sure that teaching her to think for herself is a step in the right direction.

“Oh right, the ones that I want you to take first are Double Growth Rate and Double Skill Points.”

Obviously, those two skills were playing a huge part in my own rapid progression. For whatever reason, I had yet to see anyone else with either of them. Perhaps it never occurred to residents of this world to look up skills such as those. And even if they did, the cost wasn’t exactly cheap. Acquiring such abilities at Level 1 would yield the greatest benefits, but not everyone could afford them with Talent Points alone. In Efil’s case, however...

Efil (16 y/o, Female, Half-Elf, Slave)

Level: 1

Title: None

HP: 8/8

MP: 15/15

Strength: 2

Endurance: 2

Agility: 4

Magic: 4

Luck: 1

Skills: None

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Flame Dragon King

I had to strain my eyes to see this little appendix.

Available Skill Points: 400

Efil had *four hundred* Talent Points. Considering the average person only had fifty, she had eight times the norm. This was more than enough for both of the skills that I had in mind.

In addition, there was my Experience Sharing skill. Normally, in a party, the person who delivered the final blow would get the lion’s share of the XP. With the help of this skill, however, *everyone* in the party would receive that same final amount of XP. So my plan was to rely on that boost to power-level Efil up.

As an aside, I had tried looking up Experience Sharing in my own Skills tab, but for some reason, its cost had been far more expensive than all other skills of the same rank, by an order of magnitude. It was still within reach if one really stretched for it, but in our case, there was no need to do so.

::Oh, that one? Yeah, we made a mistake when — oops, forget I said anything.::

Wait, seriously?

::It was a joke.::

Reeeeaally? All right, anyway, it seems we can pretty much assume that we're the only ones with knowledge of the "doubling" skills.

I had impressed upon Efil how important it was that my class be kept a secret. Unfortunately, the possibility of that secret being leaked through the details in Efil's Status remained. There was no cause for concern, though, as I had recently discovered that I could use Concealment on the Status of my party members as well. It was a simple matter of raising my Concealment skill up to Rank S.

The duration of Concealment's effects depended on the skill's current rank. Rank F gave just short of one minute, Rank E was ten minutes, and Rank D was one hour. Based on that, I surmised that its duration at Rank S would be around one year.

Oh, oops, my thoughts have gotten off track. As could be seen in the Passive Effects section of Efil's Status, her Curse of the Flame Dragon King had been overwritten by Blessing of the Flame Dragon King instead. This was due to the Sacred Bless spell, which was able to convert a curse into a blessing with the opposite effects. Although this made the spell sound like a miracle on paper, casting it required an incredible amount of MP, and it only worked on people who had been living with their curse for a long time. The requirements were too difficult for someone to intentionally seek out such a blessing by getting themselves cursed with the intention of flipping it later on.

"Master, what are the effects of this blessing?"

"Apparently, it makes you more resistant to fire and better at controlling it too. Sounds to me like it would complement Red Magic nicely."

"Fire..."

Hmm, seems like she's still afraid of fire. "Efil, just remember that fire doesn't have to be a tool for fighting. It's crucial to our everyday lives too, like how Clare-san uses it to cook delicious food for us, and how we all need it as a source of light to see at night. What's most important is how it's being used."

That said, I don't want to push you to use your blessing if you're uncomfortable with it."

"No...I've already made the decision to help Master in any way I can. I will make this my own so that I can use it in battle too!"

She really is a good girl. In spite of her words, it's clear that some of her fear still remains.

"W-wah, ehehe..."

Before I knew it, I found myself patting Efil's head. *Well, it seems she likes it, so that's fine, I suppose.*

"Oh, look at the time, dinner should be ready soon. Look forward to it, Efil. Clare-san's cooking is amazing!"

"Yes, Master. I'll do my best to steal her recipe!"

I was glad to see her motivated, and if her sudden fervor was also a little scary, that was something I kept to myself!

Chapter 3: Hero

One month had passed since Efil had joined my party. As planned, she'd registered with the guild and together we had cleared quest after quest as she grew accustomed to her new life. Today, we were happily in the middle of another monster subjugation.

"It's quite far off, but can you see them?" I asked Efil from the bottom of the tree she was perched on.

"Not a problem, Master. There are three Elder Treants and two Blood Mushrooms."

"That lass's eyesight never ceases to amaze me. I can't see a thing."

Yep, I can't see anything either. Our party was currently in the deepest part of Sangria Forest, a Rank B dungeon. The heavily overgrown region had a thick canopy that blocked almost all sunlight, giving birth to a dim and eerie place beneath. Thanks to that, our field of view was extremely limited. Efil, the eyes of our party, had already risen to Rank C as an adventurer. Although there was a lot that had confused her in the beginning, once she'd gotten the hang of things she had shot up through the ranks in the blink of an eye.

"All right, Efil, start us off here."

"Understood, Master."

The weapon that Efil had ultimately chosen for herself was the bow. The morning after I'd told her to think it over and choose her skills, she had come down to breakfast with Archery and Farsight already raised as high as possible with the Skill Points that she'd had on hand. Thanks to those new abilities, she'd quickly grown comfortable with her new weapon — a bit *too* comfortable, some might say. During her very first practice session at the guild's archery hall, every one of her arrows had hit the bullseye. And yes, that was the first time she had ever fired a shot. I was dumbfounded, as were the handful of adventurers who had happened to be around and were spectating on a whim.

“Clo-chan, ready?”

Sitting on Efil’s shoulder was Clotho, who had made itself smaller than my palm. Despite its size, its strength was unchanged. It was absolutely perfect as a guard escort.

“Here I go.”

Efil drew her bow, then released it. In spite of the poor visibility, and although she was several hundred meters away, her arrow flew true, almost as if it had been sucked straight in by its target.

“*Gaack!*”

The huge log that had been an Elder Treant just moments before fell heavily, an arrow sprouting from the middle of its forehead. The other treants warily scanned their surroundings, but were unable to spot Efil.

“And while wearing a maid uniform, no less. You youngsters nowadays...”

“It’s not like you don’t know she retailed the outfits herself. She crammed pretty much every enchantment she could into those things.”

“Tailor-*made* by a *maid*, eh?”

“You said it, not me.”

What Efil was wearing at the moment was one of the many outfits she had received from Clare-san, albeit with numerous improvements to make it much more suitable for fighting in. My original plan had been to acquire the Sewing skill and do it myself, but to my surprise, Efil had vehemently objected.

—

Master, please let me be the one to get Sewing!

—

Apparently, the image of the “ideal maid” that Efil was going for also needed to have a mastery of sewing. True to her word, she had used the Growth Points earned from her subsequent level-ups to acquire the skill, up until she could make the clothes that she was wearing now. This was actually the third version of her outfit. Every time we got our hands on higher-grade materials, and every

time she raised her skill rank, she would upgrade her clothing little by little. Her current wardrobe was the end product of all her efforts so far.

Confident that I could leave the sewing to her, I had decided to acquire Smithing instead. I had started to feel the limitations of the equipment that could be purchased in Parth, which had prompted me to decide (rather simplistically), “Well, then I’ll just make the weapons and armor for us all!”

Purchasing the skill was easy, but I immediately found myself facing the problem of where to get my hands on smithing tools and, more importantly, where to practice the craft.

Thankfully, a short word with Guildmaster Rio proved to be all that was needed. Using the influence of the guild, Rio had managed to help me borrow a place, and had also hooked me up with a smith who was willing to teach me. Between his guidance and my new skill, I eventually got to the point where I could call myself a passable blacksmith. After that, it was only a matter of practice, practice, practice. By now, I was capable of making a decent range of things.

“Aaauggh!”

While Gerard and I were busy bantering, the third monster fell dead. The combination of Archery with Farsight was so formidable that many of our fights could be resolved by relying solely on Efil.

“There is one Elder Treant and one Blood Mushroom left.”

“My king.”

Following Gerard’s gaze, I saw several thick and sturdy-looking roots erupt from the ground. Apparently, the last Elder Treant had discovered where we were located. *I guess its Rank B status isn’t just for show. But no matter...*

“It’s all over,” I murmured as both opponents suddenly found themselves smashed down into the earth. Under the overwhelming torrent of air pressure, even Rank B monsters were unable to take a single step. My spell gradually grew in intensity, until our enemies had been crushed into paste on the ground.

“What am I supposed to do while you two keep hogging the spotlight?”

“Don’t worry, we’re so close now that the boss of this forest could be just around the corner.”

Sure enough, we didn’t have to walk much farther before discovering an open, empty clearing with a gargantuan tree towering over the middle. Its height greatly surpassed that of its neighboring flora, and its deep purple bark looked ominous enough to evoke fear and awe in all who laid eyes on it.

“So this is the Evil Sage Tree...”

“Given how poisonous it looks, I would prefer not to touch it, if possible...”

“Stop complaining and get out in front, Gerard. Efil, permission to use Blaze Arrow granted.”

“Yes, Master!”

The target of our quest was the boss of Sangria Forest, the Evil Sage Tree. Supposedly, it was a treant several thousand years old, which had Evolved.

“Gugegogogobagogah!”

The moment it spotted us, the Evil Sage Tree started moving while letting out a hair-raising cry. *Ugh, look at it sprouting those disgustingly thick arms. Why is “sage” even in its name?*

“We don’t understand what you’re saying!” shouted Gerard, leaping into the air and chopping off the monster’s newly grown right arm with a quick swing of his sword. For added effect, he even unleashed Agito upon landing. The tree roared out in what sounded like pain, bringing its left arm to bear.

“Aaugh, it’s oozing poison from its bark. And it’s also regenerating quite fast.”

The right arm that had been chopped off only moments before had already nearly grown back.

::Gerard-san, my Blaze Arrow is fully charged!:: warned Efil through Clotho.
::Please back up!::

In addition to being a great bodyguard, Clotho was also capable of maintaining a simple mental connection with Efil that, in effect, granted her access to the Follower Network. *Clotho, what a terrifying child!*

“You got it!” With the buff from Sonic Boots in effect, Gerard managed to retreat so quickly that even the Evil Sage Tree lost sight of him. Perhaps having felt an impending sense of danger thanks to its many years of experience, the creature raised up extra thick roots from the ground and wrapped them around itself. The toughness of those roots far surpassed that of Earth Rampart, and they were oozing a deadly poison from every inch. *What are you, a sage in an ivory tower?*

Flames spurted from Efil’s arrow in all four directions, gradually converging on the arrowhead. Blaze Arrow was an original move devised by Efil that combined her proficiency in both Archery and Red Magic. It hardly needed to be said, but Blessing of the Flame Dragon King greatly helped to increase the power of this special move.

Upon release, the arrow screamed toward its target, scattering streaks of scorching heat in its wake. The seemingly impenetrable defense raised by the Evil Sage Tree practically melted before it, opening a clear path towards the monster itself. The attack almost looked like a dragon’s breath from the side.

“Gu, gah!”

The Evil Sage Tree was incapable of regenerating fast enough against the burning arrow now buried in its abdomen, charring it from within. Even so, it did not stop moving. It converted all of its branches into several thousand, no, tens of thousands of razor sharp blades, and threw them at us in a squall of death.

“Gerard, finish it.”

“Thank you for the support, my king!”

With his greatsword enchanted with Vortex Edge, Gerard stepped up to face the oncoming attack. A single swing of his blade dispelled the entire onslaught, granting him the chance to reach the heart of the monster.

“Oowaaagh!!!”

With one last dying cry, the ancient creature finally fell, bringing an end to the fight.



“Hey, Kelvin. Finished with another quest?”

While passing through Parth’s western gate on our way back from the forest, I was greeted by the guard on watch.

“You bet! I also got my hands on some really good materials!”

“Hahaha, look at that matter-of-fact attitude of yours. Only to be expected of Parth’s Number One Adventurer!”

Over the past month, partly for Efil’s training, we had taken on a large number of subjugation quests. Among them had been a few particularly powerful monsters — like this most recent one — that Rio had personally requested we handle. After us, the strongest adventurers in Parth were only Rank C, so it didn’t take long for it to become standard procedure to simply pass Rank B quests on to us.

“Welcome back too, Efil-chan. You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

“Not even a scratch. Thank you for your concern.”

“Glad to hear it. There would be a huge uproar if anything happened to you.”

“I was with Master the whole time, so there was no cause for worry.”

We stood around chatting for a while, the guard making a point to include Efil in the conversation. She had quickly grown to fit in perfectly with the rest of the city, having built close relationships with many of the residents already.

“I’m sorry, but we really should be on our way to the guild to make our report. Please excuse us.”

“Of course, of course. Sorry for stopping you guys. Good luck on your next quest, too!”

After parting ways with the guard, we headed straight for the guild.



“The subjugation of the Evil Sage Tree has been confirmed. We thank you for your service yet again.” After we made our usual report, Ange-san handed us the quest reward. “This makes your ninth consecutive Rank B quest! You’re almost at Rank A, Kelvin-san!”

“Congratulations, Master.”

“Thank you, but the promotion isn’t quite in the bag just yet.” *Wow, we’ve finished that many? I was so engrossed by the quests themselves that I totally lost count.*

“The same is true for Efil-san as well. One more quest and you can take the exam for promotion to Rank B!”

“Oh right, the exam.”

“Speaking of promotions, I still feel a little bad for your last opponent...”

“Efil-san’s arrow scored a clean hit on his head mere seconds after the starting signal, didn’t it?”

“That was because he looked so open that I thought he was testing me.”

For her Rank C promotion, Efil had had a one-on-one practice match with a Rank C adventurer who was serving as the examiner. There was no need to actually defeat him, as the purpose of the exam was merely for her to prove that she possessed abilities on par with Rank C.

During the exam, Efil had activated Concealment the instant the starting signal rang out. She had moved into the examiner’s blind spot and shot just one arrow, which had struck the examiner, and the test was over, just like that. “Fast” couldn’t even begin to describe it. Although the arrow was blunted, the examiner had been rendered unconscious. Perhaps he had taken the blow in a bad spot, or maybe there had just been that much force behind the shot. The injury itself had been cause for some concern, but it was his pride that had suffered the greatest damage.

“The adventurer who served as your examiner, Uld-san, is a veteran with years of experience under his belt, all right? It’s you two whose power levels are over the top!”

At the time, Efil had already been strong enough to hold her own in a Rank B dungeon. There was no way a Rank C adventurer could get the better of her, but apparently that was quite out of the ordinary.

“Ah, yes, Ange-san. I found a cute confectionery the other day. Would you like

to go there together one day?”

“Oh, really? Let’s go, let’s go! It’s a promise, Efil-chan!”

Ange-san, your work mode has switched off again.

This past month, Efil and Ange-san had grown extremely close. While at work, the two of them did make an effort to keep things professional, but as could be seen, that front easily crumbled at even the slightest trigger.

“A promise it is,” replied Efil with a beautiful smile. *This girl really is an angel.*

Speaking of heavenly beings, Melfina was currently away on a business trip or something. Supposedly, she was off granting a prophecy to the Oracle who had previously summoned the Heroes. To hear her tell it, the subordinate she had left her duties to had suddenly come to her with an urgent report. With an “I really, *really* don’t want to go, but I’ve got no choice, so I’ll take care of it in a jiffy...until I get back, make sure to protect Efil, all right, honey?”, she left the Follower Network. *Am I misreading this, or is Melfina becoming more and more like Efil’s mom or older sister?*

“So then, Master, when would you be free?”

“Hm? Wait, I’m coming too?”

“If you don’t mind, I kind of want to discover what pastries best suit your tastes.”

“Ah, I’m curious about that too! What kind do you like?”

Unable to withstand the urging from both sides, I eventually folded and promised to join them. However, if I was to be honest, the taste of this world’s sweets paled greatly in comparison to those back in Japan. They had no cake with cream on top, with the closest approximation being nothing more than pancakes topped with piles of fruits. As someone who had tasted Japanese pastries before, the sweets in this world felt far from adequate.

In between quests, Efil was learning how to cook from Clare-san. Although she still couldn’t hold a candle to her mentor, she had acquired the Cooking skill and was absorbing Clare-san’s teachings like a sponge soaking up water.

Many people in this world shared the misconception that technical skills

automatically imparted mastery, but that was false. There was even an anecdote about an adventurer with the Sword Mastery skill, who had lost a sword fight against a knight of the same level even though his opponent hadn't had that skill. In short, skills could only provide correction and support, at best. Even without possessing the corresponding skill, someone who tirelessly practiced a certain craft would retain the full benefits of their training. That was why I continuously worked on my smithing, just as Efil worked on her cooking. *Perhaps one day, Efil might even be able to reproduce the cakes from my previous world.*



In no time at all, the day of my promise to Efil and Ange-san arrived. The meet-up point that we had agreed on was beside the fountain in the central plaza of Parth. *This almost feels like a — yeah, who am I kidding. This is a date, isn't it?*

"But why did we have to go to the trouble of leaving separately even though we live in the same inn?"

I had initially planned on leaving with Efil, but she indirectly refused, saying, "I have various preparations to make, so how about you go ahead first?" The smile on her face brooked no argument, so there I was, waiting all by myself.

"Heeyyy, Kelvin-saaan!"

Turning towards the voice, I saw Ange-san hurrying over. Today, instead of her usual guild staff uniform, she was going with a cute boyish style, with dress shorts and an overall energetic vibe. It suited her slim build perfectly.

"Good afternoon, Ange-san. Those clothes really suit you."

"Thank you," she giggled. "Hm, where's Efil-chan?"

"Apparently, she had preparations to make. I haven't a clue what they are, though."

"Aww, Efil-chan's going all out!"

For the next few minutes, Ange-san and I passed the time with cheerful banter until Efil finally joined us.

“I’m sorry for making you two wait.”

There stood Efil in a pure white summer dress that perfectly complemented her skin tone, coordinated with a wide-brimmed straw hat. A gust of wind blew just then, fanning out her golden tresses and prompting her to hold down her hat with one hand. *Wh-why is my heart beating so fast?* Although it was a scene that I had come across often in manga and light novels, my heart couldn’t help but skip a beat when standing in front of such a cute girl actually pulling it off in real life. I usually only ever saw her in her maid uniform, which was mainly black with a white apron, so her new look practically made her glow.

“U-Um, how...is it?”

“Y-Yeah, it suits you well.”

Efil was looking down, her face bright red. *She’s an angel! I’ve had a goddess and an angel beside me this whole time!*

“Aw, okay, I admit defeat. Efil-chan, you’re way, way, way too cute!”

“Huh?! Th-That can’t be true!”

A month ago, due to malnourishment, Efil had been extremely thin and unhealthy looking. She had yet to make a full recovery, but thanks to Clare-san’s wonderfully nutritious meals and the stats growth from all our leveling up, she was finally starting to fill out.

“Well then, shall we make our way to this confectionary that Efil’s so highly recommending?”

“Let’s go! But one thing first, if I may. Kelvin-san, I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, but isn’t it about time for us to drop the polite speech with each other?”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“We’ve gotten close enough to hang out like this, right? Keeping up the polite speech makes it feel like we’re still maintaining some sort of distance, so from now on, let’s drop the suffixes!”

“All right then, Ange. Like that?”

“And I’ll just call you Kelvin! Yay!”

Well, there's no harm in building close relationships, after all. And without further ado, we made our way to the sweets shop.



"Well, I'll be. There is a lot more variety than I expected."

"From what I've heard, they all taste completely different too. Apparently, it's the large variety that's made the store so famous."

With Efil leading the way, the three of us had entered the shop in question. It turned out to be a full-sized café that, aside from selling pastries, was also running a dessert buffet. The three of us were currently seated at one of the tables in the store's outdoor space, tasting and exchanging opinions about the various delectables that we had loaded onto the plates before us.

"Master, do you want a bite?" asked Efil with a morsel of pound cake on her fork, extending it towards me in the infamous "*aaan*" pose.

"Hold on, Efil. What do you think you're doing?"

"What's wrong? We do this back at the inn all the time, don't we?"

"Now *hold on* a moment! Kelvin, you have Efil-chan feed you all the time?!"

Ange, did you really have to shout that so loudly?! Now everybody's looking at us!

"N-No, of course not. She only does this when she makes me taste her cooking."

"Mhm, we feed each other all the time."

That's only when we're ALONE in our room! Please notice all the whispering that's springing up around us!

"Y-You two feed...each other?!" Ange's shoulders quivered. "I can't back down after hearing that! Kelvin, here you go, *aaan*!" she said, grabbing a cookie and thrusting it at my face.

"W-With her hand?!"

"Oh my, are they fighting over him?"

"Isn't that Ange-san from the guild and the maid Efil-chan?!"

Oh shit, we're starting to gather an audience. Among them are even a few adventurers that I know personally.

Unable to stand it any longer, I stood up abruptly, causing my chair to rattle. "You two, I have a great idea! How about we take all this to go so that we can enjoy it at our leisure?" I suggested. *Please notice the situation we're in, you two!*

"He's taking them to go?!"

"Whoo! Spring's come for Ange!"

To my dismay, my plan only succeeded in adding fuel to the fire. Judging from some of the comments I heard, some of Ange's own acquaintances were in the crowd as well. *Oh god, it's too late...*

"Here, Master!"

"How about this, Kelvin!"

"O-Okay, okay, I'll eat them both..."

Just as I bowed to the inevitable and was about to open my mouth to accept the sweets being offered to me...

"Here I was curious about what such a crowd was gathering for, and it turns out to be something so stupid."

Our entire table, sweets and all, was sent flying. A loud crash rang out. Just in the nick of time, I managed to grab Efil and Ange and leap out of the way. With the place as crowded as it was, my Presence Sensing had warned me only at the last possible moment.

"What's the matter, good sirs?" I asked, keeping my words respectful while still exuding a menacing vibe.

The intruders turned out to be a plump man in fancy clothing and three of his toadies. It was one such underling who had kicked over our table.

"Listen up, peons. This is Prince Tabura of the illustrious country of Trycen!" shouted one of the thugs.

Noticing the sour expressions on the faces of everyone nearby, I knew right

then and there that this was going to be a major pain in the ass.



As mentioned before, my new world was split into two large continents: one in the east, and one in the west. Parth was located roughly at the center of the Eastern Continent, with four surrounding countries sharing it as a border. In the past, there had been a period of several dozen years where all of the kingdoms had been in a state of total war, each one fiercely vying for control. At the end of the war, the remaining countries, their people thoroughly exhausted by it all, had signed a peace treaty and drawn up the national borders that remained in effect to this very day. As a visible symbol of their wish for eternal peace, Parth, the City of Peace, was built at the exact point where all four lands met.

Up in the north was Gaun. It was a country of the beastkin, a race who possessed extraordinary physical capabilities. For generations, the king of Gaun had always been selected — as was to be expected of a race famed for quick fists and hot blood — through a tournament, where the champion took the crown. No exception to this, the current king was a hulking male who had thoroughly thrashed his opponents in the battle royale that had won him the crown. Rumor had it that he possessed strength on par with Rank S adventurers. Basically, Gaun was a country where the maxim “strength is justice” was truly applied. Quite honestly, they were a people that I wanted no trouble with.

To the west was the Holy Empire of Deramis. The head of the country was the Pope, with the Cardinals, Archbishops, and Bishops in a hierarchy below him. They all worshiped Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation, who was known to speak through the Oracle, a special priestess who was also responsible for preserving the knowledge of a unique summoning ritual from generation to generation. It was through this ritual that the current Oracle had summoned the four new Heroes. Another noteworthy point about Deramis was that the sole land connection that existed between the Eastern and Western Continents, also known as Crux Bridge, was located within its territory. However, the relationship between Deramis and the empire that lay on the other side was extremely tense, and security on both sides of the Bridge was always in a heightened state.

Down south was Toraj, the Country of Water. Bordered by Parth and the Sea of Dragons, where it was rumored the Water Dragon King dwelled, this country was famed for its shipbuilding techniques and agricultural advances. The royal family had supposedly descended from peasants, so many of their policies favored the common folk. The fact that Parth had plenty of food was thanks in large part to Toraj. And, to my surprise and delight, I had learned that this kingdom even had a rice-like crop. *All right, I'm definitely going to need to pay it a visit someday. If I'm in luck, I might even get to meet the famed merpeople.*

Lastly, located in the east was the military kingdom of Trycen. This was the place that had poured the most resources into its armed forces *after* the signing of the peace treaty. It was a belligerent nation that shamelessly touted human supremacy. Several times, small skirmishes had broken out along the border between Gaun and Trycen. They treated their slaves horribly, and there were rumors that many of those slaves were in fact regular citizens who had been kidnapped from other countries. The current king of Trycen had five sons, all of whom were associated with their own unpleasant rumors as well. Among the four countries, Trycen was undoubtedly the most untrustworthy one.



Apparently, it was one of the aforementioned princes from that very untrustworthy country who was currently before me.

“You’re a prince?”

“Indeed! I am none other than the Third Prince of Trycen, Prince Tabura!” declared the chubby man as if hoping to cow everyone who was listening. “And it distresses me greatly to see such indecent acts being displayed in public in broad daylight. I lament how shameless the common people have become!”

“It is as you say, my prince. As one who stands above the common man, would it not be appropriate to teach them a lesson?” suggested one of the lackeys, in what I could only assume was an attempt to instigate a fight. *So these chumps around him are his guards?*

“Hmm, let me see...oh, those two women have rather fine features!” Tabura looked Efil and Ange up and down in an extremely vulgar manner.

I felt both women jerk slightly against my arms, either from getting

goosebumps or as an instinctive reaction. *Yeah, okay, this guy's just a regular piece of shit.*

“Hold on, is that elf a slave? That makes things simple, then. You, manservant, if you hand me both women, I will overlook your crime of having made me waste my time.”

“Uh...come again?” What the hell does this pudgy prince think he's spouting? It made so little sense that my brain actually froze for a moment there, man.

“Are you deaf? Tabura-sama, in his infinite grace and mercy, is offering to grant you forgiveness. Hand over those two women right now!” barked one of the thugs as he approached us.

“K-Kelvin, what should we do?!” asked Ange in a fluster. As she was apparently about to be kidnapped, her reaction was understandable.

In contrast, what I got from Efil through the Follower Network was simply, ::Master, permission to eliminate?: *You sure have gotten tough, Efil...but hold on. Our opponent is the prince of a country, so we can't carelessly lay hands on him. We need to remain calm and think of a way to resolve this situation in a peaceful man—*

“Heh, I'll make sure to take *very* good care of both of you, all right? I can't wait for tonight to come!”

I'll eliminate him myself, Efil. Stand back.

::Understood, Master::

I let Efil down and had her fall back behind me with Ange.

“Haah? What do you think you're doing, peasant?” asked the closest flunkey in an annoyed tone.

“Not much, really. I was just thinking about how to beat you up is all.” I flashed a glance at the adventurers in the crowd of spectators.

“What the fuck you talking abou—”

Before the man could finish his sentence, I unleashed Impact at him. It was so quick that the man had already been sent flying several meters and slammed into a wall before anyone could even register what had occurred. I couldn't care

less what happened to the guy, but it was important that none of the spectators got caught up in this. Thankfully, it appeared that the other adventurers present had caught on to my intentions and were helping to protect the general public.

“What...”

Tabura and his buddies were at a complete loss for words, clearly never having imagined that I would stand up to them.

“These two remaining knuckleheads are what, Rank D, it seems? So then, ‘prince,’ seeing as you’ve picked a fight with me, I can assume that you’re prepared for the consequences, right?”



The weather is great today. The location is pretty much the perfect place for a date. In spite of my initial reluctance, I confess that, as a healthy young man in the prime of my years, I was looking forward to this quite a bit. Anyone would hate to be interrupted in the middle of such a nice outing, wouldn’t they? To add insult to injury, this asshole even wants to lay hands on Efil and Ange? Now I really can’t let him walk away in one piece, can I?

“Y-You knave! Do you not know who you are so outrageously insulting?! I am the Third Prince of Trycen!”

“Oh, I know who you are, thanks to you repeating your name several times. And it was your people who...what did you call it, ‘outrageously insulted’ us first, wasn’t it?”

“The only thing we are preparing for is to do some serious violence against you!!!”

I sighed. “If all you can do is spout these second-rate villain lines, I recommend you move on and draw your weapon already.”

Tabura and his guards obliged, finally drawing their swords and preparing for combat. *You guys have really been slacking off on the training.*

“Count your regrets in the next world, peasant!!”

Two of the bodyguards raised their swords and charged at me. I stepped past them easily, however, leaving their blades to slice through empty air. The looks

on their faces made it clear they had no idea what had just happened.

The prince's personal bodyguards are this low level? Really?? I sighed again. I had done nothing more than evade them with superior Agility, without using any spells or tricks. The guards had been unable to even follow me with their eyes.

“What — he’s disappeared?!”

Okay, you guys are way too slow. “Hey, you meatheads sure you don’t need to be protecting this fatty over here?”

The guards turned to find me standing behind Tabura, who was unable to move thanks to the knife I had pressed against his neck.

“Y-You lot, don’t do anything careless!”

“You heard the man. Don’t do anything careless, okay?”

Tabura seemed extremely flustered by what was likely his first time feeling so close to death. *Let’s try probing a bit before finishing him off.*

“Well then, ‘prince.’ What business do you have in our lovely city of Parth?” I asked, softly tapping the tip of my dagger against Tabura’s neck and grinning villainously. The two guards in front of us could only look on helplessly.

“You don’t need to know that, knave. Come now, withdraw th-that thing that you’re holding. If you do so, I’ll pretend this never happened.”

“Shhhh. I’m the one asking questions here.”

Wordlessly, I cast Air Pressure at the two guards, pressing them down to the ground. Somehow, this spell had become my go-to move recently. At full strength, it was powerful enough to squash Rank B monsters to jelly, but I couldn’t very well do that right here in the middle of town. As intended, the guards fell to their knees.

“Wh-What is this...”

“I-I can’t s-stand...”

“Jean! Alba! What’s wrong?!”

Judging from their reactions, I figured these guys had no idea that the Air

Pressure spell even existed. I wasn't sure if that was an indication of their own ignorance or of the general underdevelopment of magic in Trycen.

"If you don't want me to use this on you next, 'prince,' I recommend you answer me honestly."

"You...you *knave!*"

"Just so you know, I also possess a skill that allows me to tell if you're lying. And if you do lie, I'll flatten you. So keep that in mind and choose your answers carefully."

"D-Dammit!"

In truth, the idea that I could see through lies was simply a bluff. I didn't actually possess such a skill, but Tabura appeared to have fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. Through clenched teeth, he muttered a reply. "I came to meet the local guildmaster, Rio."

"What for?"

"I heard that a highly skilled adventurer recently showed up in Parth and has made it his base. I came here all the way from Trycen to personally evaluate this man."

"The quality of your guards seems a bit lacking for a prince on such a journey. Isn't Trycen supposed to be a military country?"

"Hah! In Trycen, ability is everything. It is the talented who stand at the top. My standing back home is nothing. I might as well be dirt."

"So you wanted to take in a strong adventurer and rack up achievements through him?"

"That's right!"

Uh...yeah, okay, this guy's an idiot. His way of thinking is far too simplistic. Maybe this is why people back in his own country treat him with such disdain?

I sighed yet again. "I'm pretty sure that adventurer is me."

There was nothing wrong with the idea of gathering talented subordinates, but it was hard to imagine anyone with actual talent being willing to sign up

with this guy. Even considering the draw of being associated with a royal, those that someone like Tabura managed to gather would likely be of limited ability.

“I-Is that right?! Then by all means, come work for me!”

“Like hell,” I snorted.

At the same time as my retort, I increased the strength of Air Pressure. Tabura and his crew actually sank into the ground like you would see in a gag manga.

“I dare you to mess with us again. Next time, I *will* crush your heads, understand?”

I wasn’t sure if any of them were actually still conscious, but I had to leave them one final warning regardless. *Well then, that’s the trash taken care of.*

The surrounding crowd had erupted into cheers the moment the fight (if you could even call that sadly lopsided encounter a “fight”) had ended. Efil and Ange dashed towards me.

“Thank you for taking care of it, Master.”

“You were so cool, Kelvin!”

“I’m sorry we were so rudely interrupted, but that stupid ape is gone now. Want to go pick out new plates?”

The two girls nodded with delight, and amid the friendly jabs and teasing of the other customers, the three of us resumed our date.



Later that night, after the date, Efil and I were in our room at the inn. The two of us were in bed together, as we were still in a single-person room. I had asked Clare-san for a bigger room many times, but she always refused me with seemingly random excuses. I had more or less given up at this point.

The day I bought Efil from the slave merchant, we had ended up sharing the bed after all. Although it was meant for one person, it was spacious enough. There was just enough room for two people if they didn’t mind sleeping a bit close together. At first, we were both extremely nervous, but it didn’t take us long to adjust. By now, we slept snuggled together as a matter of course.

I had gotten into bed and was starting to drift off when Efil suddenly broke the silence.

“Thank you for today, Master.”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?”

“Thank you for going along with my request and coming to the store with me, and also for protecting us.”

Oh, that’s what she meant. “You help me out all the time too, don’t you? If there’s ever anything I can do for you, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

Over the past month, Efil had grown by leaps and bounds, both as an adventurer and as a maid. However, although she hid it while we were out in public, she still had a more childish side that matched her age. When we were alone together, she often wanted to be pampered.

“When that prince looked at me, I couldn’t move for a split second. It seems I still need to get much stronger...”

I reached out to hold Efil’s hand, using my other hand to stroke her head at the same time. She really liked having her head stroked, but it was the hand-holding that made her practically melt with bliss.

“Since you’re the type of person who would worry about it even more if I told you not to, let’s just say we’ll get stronger together. Efil, I need you.”

Efil started tearing up. “I’ll follow you for the rest of my life!”

Oh dear, it seems I’ve made her cry again. This takes me right back to the day I dispelled her curse. I guess I’ll just lend her my chest until she calms down.



After Efil’s sobbing had subsided, what with the date, the unwelcome interruption, and everything that had happened that day, the two of us were tired and agreed to blow out the candle and go straight to sleep. Our hands were still clasped together, so I could feel her warmth against my skin. It made me feel reassured somehow. I hoped that she felt the same way. Recalling the stunning figure of Efil in a summer dress, I felt myself slowly drifting off into pleasant dreams.

“Umm...Master, are you still awake?”

Efil’s voice jerked me back to consciousness. My eyelids fluttered open and I saw her beautiful emerald green eyes staring back at me.

“What’s the matter? Can’t sleep?”

“No, that’s not...um, am I not attractive as a woman?”

“Come again?”

I was dumbfounded. *What is she saying? Has she never looked into a mirror before?* However, Efil’s expression was entirely serious, shadowed by what looked like a trace of sadness.



“It has already been some time since you bought me. Due to your good will, we sleep together in the same bed every night. And yet...” Abruptly, Efil’s face turned bright red so quickly that if this were a manga, a small mushroom cloud would have erupted from the top of her head. Worried about her, I sat up.

“W-When are you going to take me?”

“HUH?!” Caught entirely by surprise, I ended up shouting out loud.

Hold on — no really, hold on just a damn minute! Why is Efil suddenly saying this?! Cool and classy gentleman that I am, there’s a limit to how much even my mind can take!

“Th-That’s what I was taught by the slave merchant...nobody ever told me specifically what it entails, but night duti—”

“STOP! Stop right there, Efil! Don’t finish that sentence!”

You piece of shit slave merchants, what the hell were you telling this pure and innocent girl?! Realistically, it made sense for the topic to be brought up in that sort of place, but the conversation was happening so fast that I was in a state of complete panic. Efil, don’t look at me with upturned eyes! Stop blushing! Don’t pair it with that worried expression!! That’s right, Nerves of Steel! I’ve gotta increase my skill level! Right now!

“I’m...very sorry, Master. The real reason behind today’s invitation was because I wanted to draw Master’s eye. I asked Clare-san to help me choose an outfit and I tried my best, but I guess I’m just not good en—”

“What are you saying?! Of course that’s not true! You get so much cuter every single day, I’m working so hard to control myself each night! Oh god, what am I saying? In any case, you’re the most attractive woman I’ve ever known!”

“Master...!”

Once again, tears erupted from Efil’s eyes as if a dam had been broken. *Gosh, this girl is crying a lot today. But good on me for managing to say it! What am I supposed to do now, though?! In the first place, do I even have that kind of experience? M-Melfina-sensei! Oh right, she’s not here right now.*

::Zzz...I'll have the strawberry-flavored one please....::

Wait, she's still in the Network?! But she's asleep! S-Sensei! This is no time to be having weird dreams! Dammit, and I disconnected Gerard like I always do when I have alone time with Efil. So I really have no one to rely on? Ahh, screw this, what will happen will happen!

"So yeah, there's no need to put yourself down unnecessarily, Efil. I just didn't want to force you into anything simply because you're my slave. I'm sure you don't want to do something like that with a guy you don't even li—"

"I love you, Master," interrupted Efil, wiping her tears. "As my Master, as my companion, and as a man...I love you. I love you very much. You never once gave me a dirty look for being afflicted with the curse, instead going to great lengths to teach me the warmth of companionship. For you, Master, I..."

I felt her grip my hand a bit harder.

"Are you sure about this? I...probably won't be able to hold back."

"Yes, I'm sure. For someone to love me so much that he loses himself for a while...it would reassure me. Truly. Would...would you do that for me please?"

The next morning, for the first time since I brought Efil home, she and I both ended up sleeping in.



The Holy Empire of Deramis was the home of the world's largest religious organization, the Holy Order of Rinne, which worshiped Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation. More than thirty thousand believers lived within its borders. Roughly one year ago, the Oracle of Deramis had summoned four Heroes from another world. The leader of those Heroes, Kanzaki Touya, was now standing on a balcony at the Palace of Deramis, lost in thought.

"Touya, what are you doing here?"

"Hm? Oh, hi there, Setsuna."

When Touya turned around, he found Shiga Setsuna, his childhood friend, standing there beside him. As she had her black hair up in a ponytail and a thin layer of sweat was glistening on her skin, she had likely just returned from her

daily training at the practice grounds. Back in their previous world, she had been their school council president. With looks that placed her first or second within the entire school, marks that were consistently in the top percentile for her grade, and such proficiency at kendo that she made it to the nationals every year without fail, Setsuna had commanded enormous popularity and respect from both her male and female peers.

“Colette is in the middle of praying to Goddess Melfina. I’m standing guard to stop anyone from going in.”

In contrast to Setsuna’s upright and unselfish character, Touya was, for better or worse, “sincerity” personified. Although not quite at Setsuna’s level, he had also maintained high grades and was talented at sports. In addition, he possessed a strong sense of justice. His ability to treat everyone, regardless of status, kindly and as equals made him welcome wherever he went. As if that wasn’t enough, he was so handsome that he could easily have become an idol if he’d wanted to. Not once in his life had he ever experienced adversity, and to him, being the center of attention was simply a given. Having grown up in such an environment, he lacked a sense of doubt or mistrust, and sincerely believed everyone to be good at heart. It could be said that while this was one of his strengths, it was most certainly also a weakness.

“Colette is praying again, is she? It’s been almost a year since we were summoned to this world, but so far, the only time we met the goddess was during the summoning itself.”

“Being summoned was rather surprising, wasn’t it? The four of us just happened to be hanging out in the classroom after school, and the next thing we knew, we had been called to another world. With a goddess greeting us, no less.”

“I seem to remember you looking a lot more delighted than surprised, Touya. Your eyes were practically sparkling.”

“Who wouldn’t feel that way?! A goddess needed our help to defeat a Demon Lord. Could there be any greater honor?!”

“An honor...”

Touya’s answer was delivered as a statement of fact, with no trace of

uncertainty or hesitation. This only added to Setsuna's growing apprehension.

It is true that this is an honorable mission...we are here for the sake of everyone in this world. While it's been smooth sailing so far, though, I can't imagine things staying this way forever. Touya, do you truly understand that our lives are on the line here? When the going gets tough, will you be able to calmly handle it? When you, who have never known hardship, hit a wall...will we be able to survive? Setsuna weighed the world against her life and the lives of her friends. If he can't, then I'll have to do whatever is necessary to protect my friends...

An intense light suddenly spilled out from the cathedral where Colette was praying.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

"It's coming from inside! Has Colette done something?!"

"Touya, let's go!"

"Right behind you!"

The two otherworldly Heroes rushed towards the cathedral.



Constructed at the very center of the Deramis Palace, home of the Pope, was the Great Deramis Cathedral, the largest of its kind in the world. Astonishingly, a large portion of it was coated in silver. One look at the building with its sublime glow, as it reflected the light of the sun, was enough to understand why some called this landmark the holiest place in the world. During the day, it was normally overflowing with believers on their pilgrimages, but the cathedral always closed its doors at dusk. At that moment, in the dead of night, there was but a single young, silver-haired girl passionately offering up her prayers.

"Melfina-sama, I implore you, let me look upon your holy visage once again."

The girl was Colette, the Oracle of Deramis. She had been ten when she'd taken up the mantle, and had been praying every day since, without fail. The reason the cathedral closed its doors at night was so she wouldn't be interrupted during her prayers. It spoke volumes about how much weight

Deramis placed on the ability to receive prophecies from Melfina.

“Please grant me a prophecy.”

Just before the bell tolled midnight, the statue of the goddess on the altar began to glow. Before long, the glow had spread to envelop the entire sculpture. The awe-inspiring wings of the idol began to flap, each stroke causing the intensity of the light to grow stronger. Before long, Colette found herself face to face with the dazzling figure of the goddess in all her glory.

“M-Melfina-sama!” cried Colette, so excited that she lost all semblance of composure.

Melfina smiled gently in response. “It has been a while, Colette. I last descended when I summoned the Heroes. I believe it has been a year since then?”

“Y-Yes, my Lady.”

Colette was incredibly nervous. In this country, her unique position as the Oracle placed her second only to the Pope. As such, she was no stranger to standing before large crowds of believers. Her current state was a far cry from her usual cool and collected self.

“I am glad to see that you’re well. Let’s get down to business then, shall we? As the day of the Demon Lord’s return draws closer, I have come to check up on our Heroes. They are steadily growing stronger without any problems, I trust?”

Colette nodded. “Please take a look at this,” she said, producing a recording orb from her chest pocket. The blue sphere was a Rank A item capable of preserving anything from voices to videos to Status screens. This particular item had been left in Colette’s care, primarily to record any prophecies that she received. Needless to say, it was an extremely valuable object.

“Let me see,” said the goddess, holding a hand out over the orb.

Kanzaki Touya (18 y/o, Male, Human, Sword Saint)

Level: 53

Title: Otherworld Hero

HP: 753/753

MP: 431/431

Strength: 265

Endurance: 258

Agility: 269

Magic: 264

Luck: 530 (+160)

Skills: Absolute Gospel (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank S), Dual Wield (Rank C), White Magic (Rank C), Army Command (Rank B), Super Luck (Rank B)

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Spirit of Light, Concealment (Rank B)

Shiga Setsuna (18 y/o, Female, Human, Samurai)

Level: 52

Title: Otherworld Hero

HP: 477/477

MP: 318/318

Strength: 361

Endurance: 219

Agility: 573 (+160)

Magic: 155

Luck: 214

Skills: Iron Cutting Authority (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank A), Mind's Eye (Rank B), Sky Walk (Rank B), Danger Detection (Rank B), Acute Reflexes (Rank B)

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Spirit of Wind, Concealment (Rank B)

Mizuoka Nana (18 y/o, Female, Human, Tamer)

Level: 48

Title: Otherworld Hero

HP: 294/294

MP: 589/589

Strength: 143

Endurance: 493 (+160)

Agility: 95

Magic: 347

Luck: 191

Skills: Animal Communication (Unique Skill), Blue Magic (Rank B), White Magic (Rank B), Taming (Rank A), Companionship (Rank C), Iron Wall (Rank B)

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Spirit of Water, Concealment (Rank B)

Kuromiya Miyabi (18 y/o, Female, Human, Black Mage)

Level: 53

Title: Otherworld Hero

HP: 270/270

MP: 810/810

Strength: 105

Endurance: 211

Agility: 204

Magic: 794 (+320)

Luck: 156

Skills: Parallel Processing (Unique Skill), Black Magic (Rank A), Magic Conservation (Rank B), Magic Detection (Rank C), Concealment (Rank B), Magic Enhancement (Rank A)

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Spirit of Darkness, Concealment (Rank B)

“Oh...yes, steady growth indeed...”

“Thank you very much!” Colette felt deeply moved, and her excitement continued to grow. “Melfina-sama, I implore you, bless us with a prophecy!”

There was a pause as Melfina scrambled internally for a moment. “I feel an evil presence from the Rizean Empire,” she found herself saying. “Send the Heroes there. Ensure that they do not mistakenly go in the direction of Parth.”

“I shall do as you wish, Goddess!”

The light that had been given form nodded, then slowly began to fade. “Do not disappoint me, my Oracle.”

Just as Colette had seen off the last particles of light, the door of the great cathedral burst open.

“Colette, are you all right?!”

With Touya at the front, all of the Heroes came charging in.

Colette turned towards them and proclaimed in a sonorous voice, “The Goddess has granted us a prophecy!”



“Melfina’s sure taking a while, isn’t she?” I asked, drawing a card from Efil’s hand. We were back in our room at the Fairy’s Song.

“Today is the fifth day. I am getting a bit worried too,” replied Efil, taking a card from Gerard.

“Come now. Princess is arguably the only one who doesn’t need the rest of us to worry about her, isn’t she?”

“Dude, how many times have I told you not to call her ‘Princess’?”

“And, as I keep telling you,” returned Gerard, drawing from Clotho’s hand, “as a knight, how can I not have a princess? Wait, hold on, that was the Joker!”

“Gerard-san, the game loses all meaning if you tell everyone when you get it.”

We were currently gathered together, enjoying a round of Old Maid. I’d done a double take when I first learned that this world had playing cards, but after thinking it over, I realized they had likely been introduced by some other transmigrator before me. The playing cards in this world were nearly the same

quality as those found in Japan. *Seriously, what's with these random advances in the weirdest niches?*

"Curses! Clotho, you deceived me!"

"You chose that card yourself, didn't you? Here you go, Clotho, take one from me."

Clotho obediently plucked one from my hand.

"Oh, look at that, Clotho's done."

"Clotho's the first winner this round, then."

We had disabled the Follower Network for the moment. If we hadn't, it would have been like playing with our hands out in the open.

"Aha, I'm done too!"

"Congratulations, Master."

Efil turned towards Gerard, reaching for his cards.

"H-Hold on, Efil. Are you sure you don't want to pick this card instead?"

"Thank you for your warning. In that case..."



"Master, I've prepared some snacks."

"Oooh, is it the stuff we bought from the store the other day? Sure, let's dig in!"

While we were taking a break from the card game, Efil served everyone the sweets that she had taken out.

"Without further ado —"

::I'm back!::

Agh! Damn, that surprised me!

"Come on, Melfina, you almost made me drop this delicious pastry."

::Ah, I'm sorry. I came back as fast as I could.::

I reactivated my telepathic connection. *There we go, Follower Network back*

up and running. Efil and Clotho quickly caught on as well.

“Welcome back, Melfina-sama.”

Clotho bounced up and down.

::Mm, glad to be back. I’m relieved to see that Efil and Clotho are well. And Gerard is...all curled up in a corner? What’s happened to him?::

“He’s wallowing in the bitterness of defeat. Don’t mind him.”

“How could I have lost...”

Damn, old man, do you have to be that depressed about losing a card game? Although he was extremely reliable in battle, outside of battle, he was pretty much just a friendly grandpa.

“All right, joking aside, how were the Heroes, Melfina?”

“Oh right, Princess, you still haven’t told us much about them.”

“They’re Heroes, so I’m sure they’re extremely powerful, aren’t they?”

With Melfina having taken off so suddenly, leaving only the telepathic equivalent of a hastily written note, all of us were quite curious about what she had been up to in Deramis.

::It has been almost a year since the Heroes were summoned, so I had to check in and see how they’ve grown.::

“Well?”

Melfina sighed. *Hm, she seems a bit glum.*

::Here, have a look.::

Several Status windows were suddenly projected through the Follower Network.

“Uh...these are the Heroes?”

“Their levels are not as high as I had expected,” Efil murmured.

“I could probably take on these youngsters with my current stats, don’t you think?” added Gerard.

Clearly, I wasn’t the only one who had misgivings.

::You all feel the same?::

“Frankly, in light of their ‘Hero’ title and all, I had expected them to be around Level 100. It’s been almost a year since they were summoned, right? What have they been doing this whole time?”

::Deramis has an order of Holy Knights. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say they were likely being trained by the order while being nurtured with the greatest care, always with a significant safety margin in place.::

So, heavily protected, then. I can understand where Deramis is coming from, but would these Heroes actually be able to fight on the front lines?

::I confess, I’m also disappointed. Will they actually be ready in time for the Demon Lord’s resurrection? In any case, if they fail, I’ll take care of things myself, so there’s no need for you to worry about this, honey.::

If only it were that easy not to worry about something...

“Just out of curiosity, how strong would this Demon Lord be?”

::There is variation from one generation to the next, but Demon Lords are usually around Level 100.::

“At this rate, it’s gonna take those Heroes several years to get there, isn’t it?”

“Considering they won’t be able to rely on the knights for support after out-leveling them, their rate of growth will probably slow down even more.”

I suppose there’s nothing we can do except pray that whatever advice Melfina gave them pays off.

::On the other hand, it seems that you’ve grown a lot in the five days I was gone, honey.::

“Mhm. We took care of another subjugation quest from Rio again. This time, it was a monster called the Evil Sage Tree. Have a look, I made this with the materials I got from it,” I replied, holding up the staff that I had crafted from the magic-rich wood dropped by the monster. Out of all the gear I had made recently, this was the item that I was proudest of.

::A mid-Rank A monster? To be capable of defeating an Evil Sage Tree already...I am amazed. May I have a look at your Status windows?::

“Sure thing.”

Kelvin (23 y/o, Male, Human, Summoner)

Level: 42

Title: Champion of Parth

HP: 427/427

MP: 890/890

Strength: 83

Endurance: 87

Agility: 261

Magic: 474

Luck: 349

Skills: Summoning (Rank S) [Available slots: 7 (Clotho: 100 MP, Gerard: 80 MP, Melfina: ? MP)], Green Magic (Rank A), White Magic (Rank A), Analyze Eye (Rank S), Presence Sensing (Rank B), Concealment (Rank S), Nerves of Steel (Rank B), Army Command (Rank B), Smithing (Rank A), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points, Experience Sharing

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank S)

Efil (16 y/o, Female, Half-Elf, Battle Maid)

Level: 38

Title: Perfect Maid

HP: 312/312

MP: 570/570

Strength: 159

Endurance: 157

Agility: 329

Magic: 313

Luck: 77

Skills: Archery (Rank A), Red Magic (Rank B), Farsight (Rank B), Covert Action (Rank A), Service (Rank B), Cooking (Rank B), Sewing (Rank B), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Flame Dragon King, Concealment (Rank S)

::To grow this much in only a month...honey, perhaps you should rein in your battle junkie side just a bit?::

“I’ve been working hard at smithing lately too!” *You strike me deep, Melfina, you really do.* “Still, the Heroes’ Statuses make for a good reference. I find it quite impressive that they all have a Unique Skill and a blessing. Efil is the only person I’ve seen so far with a blessing.”

::It’s very rare to meet a blessed person. In the case of the Heroes, they got theirs as part of the bonuses received from transmigrating.::

“Ugh. I know I’m not really in a position to say so, but that does make me jealous.”

::Well, if it bothers you so much...when you finally manage to Summon me, I’ll give you my blessing. How’s that sound?::

“Whoa, seriously? You’re not just pulling my leg, right?!”

::Mhm, seriously. So work hard at becoming powerful enough to Summon me, all right?::

“What is this sudden surge of motivation rushing through my veins?! All right, I’m going to work my ass off!” Before I knew it, I had already clenched my fists in a “guts” pose.

Efil was, for her part, blushing happily while murmuring something like, “If we both have blessings, then we’d be a match...”

I gasped. “Whoa, I kind of lost myself there. All right, returning to the topic at hand, it seems like a good idea for all of us to have at least one boost skill.”

“I might get Acute Reflexes then, Master.”

“My king, I already possess Herculean Strength and Iron Wall.”

“Oh hey, how about I get boost skills for all stats?”

“Please don’t, my king! I’ll lose my role in the party!”

Continuing in this vein, we had fun discussing skills until late into the night.

Chapter 4: Demon

Efil's mornings were always early. I wasn't particularly bad with mornings myself, but she would always be gone from our bed by the time I woke up. Usually, she would be down in the inn's kitchen by then, making breakfast.

"Good morning, Master."

Noticing that I hadn't woken up at my usual time, Efil, who had long since changed from her negligee into her maid uniform, came to wake me herself. Apparently, it was already time for breakfast. Since we had been chatting until quite late the night before, I was still sleepy.

"Give me five more minutes..."

"Your breakfast will grow cold."

Oh come on, don't look at me with such a sad face. All right, I'm up, I'm up. I can't very well let the breakfast that Efil went to all the trouble of making for me get cold, can I!

"Hnnngg, good morning, Efil. How did you manage to get up so early after we stayed up so late last night?"

I had never seen Efil oversleep. Well, aside from *that* day, of course.

"Master, if you live a well-regulated life, your body will wake you all by itself. Besides, don't you know that it feels great to wake up early?"

"Hahaha...I'll try my best..."

"You need not worry, Master. I take my responsibility of waking you up at a healthy hour very seriously."

Apparently, my life is going to be regulated for me.

"Here are your clothes."

Not only did Efil help me change, she also helped to do my hair. Just like every other morning, it was the full treatment. *I don't think I'd be able to live without*

her at this point.



After I finished getting ready, I headed down to the first floor with Efil. The time was around 7 a.m., and there was a smattering of customers already eating breakfast. I'd always found the food at the Fairy's Song exceptional, and clearly I wasn't alone in that opinion as the place was always packed during peak hours.

"Good morning, Kel-chan. You're up early again today."

As the person who managed this popular inn, Clare-san's mornings were early too. She not only handled all administrative duties, but took care of the daily kitchen prep as well, working until late at night. Strangely enough, I had yet to see her husband.

"Thanks to Efil, I am living a very healthy lifestyle."

"Remember to thank her, all right? Being woken up by such a cute girl each day is a privilege, so make sure you never forget that."

"I spend every day thanking her with every fiber of my being!"

"Oh, Master, you sure know what to say..."

Once we had finished our usual greetings, I sat down to eat. Every day, at exactly the same time, Efil would place the food that she had made right here. The table had essentially become our reserved seat for this time of day. Even if I didn't look the part, I was the top adventurer in all of Parth. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone with the guts to sit at a table where a meal had been left out just for me. Although doing this during lunchtime when the place was packed would be problematic, there were plenty of seats available at breakfast, so Clare-san didn't mind it at all.

"Well then, let's dig in!"

"Eat slowly, all right?"

In the seat across from me, Efil also started on her breakfast. In the beginning, she had refused to eat at the same table as me. Supposedly, it was a breach of etiquette in this world for slaves to eat with their masters. As she had said, "To

eat the same fare as Master is far too disrespectful!" I, however, had no intention of treating her like a slave, so I made it a rule that, in my own family, everyone eats together. At this point, Efil was used to sharing the table with me.

"Master, what are your plans for today?"

"Well, there haven't been any good quests lately..."

Aside from the special ones assigned to us by Rio, it was quite rare for a subjugation quest of Rank B or higher to spring up around Parth. On the other hand, quests of a lower rank weren't very attractive to us.

"I think I'll be focusing on smithing today. I'm almost done with Gerard's gear."

"Then I shall pack you lunch."

"Thanks, I'd love that. What about you, what are you going to do today?"

"I am thinking of helping Clare-san here until lunchtime."

On days like this, where we had no quests lined up, it was normal for us to do our own things. In my case, it was usually shopping or smithing, whereas Efil often helped out at the inn while taking cooking lessons from Clare-san.

"Oh, you'll help out again today, Efil-chan? When you're here, we get a lot more customers, which is great for us. You've pretty much become our poster girl, actually. Guess I should raise your salary soon!"

True enough, the inn had grown noticeably busier after Efil had started helping out, with the majority of the new customers being male adventurers that I had seen at around Parth before. Lately, Efil was becoming a hot topic in the guild, only second to me in popularity. Although she was still technically Rank C, no one doubted that she was the second strongest person in town. Add to that her beautiful looks and lovable personality...it would have been stranger for people *not* to be talking about her. A lot of these new customers were those hoping to catch a glimpse of her up close.

"There's no need for that! Clare-san's always taking such good care of me and teaching me so much about cooking. Helping out is the least I can do!" replied

Efil with a dazzling smile.

“What a good girl she is! Kel-chan, you’ll probably never find another like her again, so whatever you do, make sure you never lose her!”

“Lose her? That’s hilarious...you know I’ll absolutely crush anyone who tries to lay a hand on her, right?”

Just like that “prince” the other day.

“Hah, go a little easier on the crushing. Oh, right...Rio left a message for you. He wants you to swing by sometime today.”

“Could it be another special quest?”

“No idea. You’ll have to ask him yourself.”

Hmm...I had planned on spending the day making Gerard’s gear, but I guess I could stop by the guild first.

“All right, then I’ll head over now. Want to come with me, Efil?”

“Of course, Master.”



Having finished breakfast, Efil and I walked over to the guild together. Melfina and Gerard were just waking up, but Clotho had been awake even before me, and was already settled in its usual place on Efil’s shoulder.

::Aaahhh...good morning....::

That was a pretty big yawn. Even goddesses can be bad with mornings?

::My king, will we be having breakfast soon?::

I ate already.

::I didn’t::

My Followers had no need to consume actual food, since my magic provided them with sustenance. It was more of a personal preference. Since I had made the “everyone eats together” rule, I was planning to buy a house someday so that Gerard and Clotho could remain Summoned and actually eat with us.

“When we get to the workshop, you can have a packed lunch made by Efil.

Sorry, Efil, can you make another portion?”

::Efil’s cooking! Now that’s something to look forward to!::

::Honey, why aren’t you powerful enough to Summon me yet?!::

I spent the rest of the walk trying to placate Melfina, and we ended up at the guild before I knew it. *Fingers crossed for a subjugation quest!*



“A demon, you say?”

Guildmaster Rio had just presented us with the reason for the summons. As I had hoped, it was indeed a special subjugation quest.

“That’s right. Eyewitness accounts came from the Rank D dungeon The Hidden Cavern of the Sage. A party of adventurers who were going through it happened upon a hidden room, inside of which there was, apparently, a demon.”

Demons, dragons, and angels ranked together in the top tier of all life forms in this world. According to Melfina, they could supposedly even rival the gods. The most powerful among them had, several times throughout history, managed to become Demon Lords. Their strength, and thus the danger they posed, was formidable. That said, as eyewitness accounts of them were few and far between, not much was known about their way of life. There were many diverse theories about them, with some believing Demon Lords to be heralds dispatched from a “Demon World,” others claiming them to be a race from an undiscovered continent, and so on.

Could this be the source of the rumors regarding a Demon Lord that I’ve been hearing around town?

::There are many different ways in which a Demon Lord can appear, be it a monster who’s gone berserk after its Evolution, the fall of a king who’s lost his mind, or a being summoned from another world, just to name a few. Regardless of the process, however, it is those that possess overwhelming strength and the intention to destroy the world who turn into Demon Lords.::

I see. I had imagined them as kings of a demon race, as they are so often

depicted in RPGs, but guess it's different here.

::That's right. And that's why even I have no idea how or when the next Demon Lord will appear. But one thing is certain: even after a Demon Lord is defeated, given enough time, another one will always appear.::

They come back? Is there no way to break the cycle?

::It's...part of the natural order of things in this world, and therefore an unchangeable phenomenon.::

Natural order of things...huh. Is it just me, or does Melfina sound a bit evasive? No matter, let's leave it alone for now.

"So how did these adventurers manage to make it back alive?" I asked Rio, continuing our conversation.

"They said that the creature was sealed inside the hidden room. They couldn't attack it for fear of accidentally undoing the seal."

Well, this does sound like something that Rank D adventurers wouldn't be able to handle. I suppose it's akin to finding a sleeping dragon.

"And so you brought the matter to me."

"To be honest, I struggled quite a bit with whether or not to call you this time. We have no way of knowing how strong this demon is. It could be Rank S for all we know. If you wish to turn the quest down, I'll make arrangements to bring in a Rank S adventurer."

It was rare for Rio to show this much concern for me. When he assigned the Evil Sage Tree quest, he had done so with the utmost nonchalance. *That says a lot about how dangerous this opponent might be...*

::The strength of individual demons can lie anywhere on a very large spectrum. That said, their weakest members are still around Rank B.::

Even their weakest ones are that strong? Hmm, should I accept or decline this quest?

"Incidentally, Kelvin-kun, did you happen to meet Prince Tabura from Trycen the other day?"

Uh-oh. "I...might have, or I might not have..."

"Is that so? You see, I'm having a bit of trouble finding the scoundrel who laid hands on the prince of another country right here in Parth. Cleaning up after that incident was oh so much trouble. The guild staff had to work so hard that they're all tuckered out."

"Oh wow, really? Sounds like you've had quite a rough time." *Don't tell me he's directing this conversation towards...*

"We were so close to getting into diplomatic trouble with Trycen like you wouldn't believe. I had to do so much running around. If I were to represent it all with a monetary value, it would probably be something like...oh I'm sorry, I went off on a bit of a tangent there. What were we talking about before? Ah, yes, so will you be accepting this quest?"



"He's the real demon..."

I had ultimately ended up folding in the face of Rio's less than subtle references to the trouble I had caused him. At the moment, I was having a strategy meeting with my party in a guild smithing room that had been permanently assigned to me.

::There's no point second-guessing what's already done, honey. Instead, focus on making sure that all possible preparations have been made for facing such an enemy.::

"Given how I was brought up, I've never met a demon before. Are they really that strong?" Efil asked.

"When I was still alive, I participated in the subjugation of a lesser demon that appeared in one of our territories. Although it was of the weakest rank, killing it still involved the gathering of an entire squad of our very finest. I can beat it myself now, with my current stats, but if it Evolves? I can't even begin to fathom how strong it could become."

Efil gulped. "C-Can we really win against such an opponent?"

"Guys, there's no need to get too anxious about it. Thankfully, the demon is

currently sealed up. I'll check it out with Analyze Eye first, and if it's clear that we can't win, we can immediately turn back. Melfina, do you have any information on demons that you can share with us?"

I had never met a demon before either, of course. For situations like these, I'd learned it was best to ask Melfina first, in case she might have some useful intel.

::Their appearances vary from one to the next. There are those who take on the classic image of a demon, and those who look incredibly similar to humans. In general, it can be assumed that the more humanoid the form, the higher level they are.::

"The one that I fought had purple skin and wings sprouting from its back. Its face looked a lot more like an orc than a human."

::That sounds like a generic lesser demon, yes. And it isn't only their physical appearances but their abilities that can differ greatly. As a race, however, all of them are blessed with extremely tough bodies and an abundance of magic, which gives them a certain degree of flexibility with acquiring and using a range of skills. All things considered, there is no one way to deal with them; each individual will require a different method of fighting.::

Which means we can't actually plan out a proper course of attack. What a troublesome creature.

"That's all the more reason to make every possible preparation beforehand. Let's start by reviewing our equipment. Gerard, your gear is ready."

"Ohh, is that so! I've been waiting for ages!"

I drew a pitch black shield from Clotho's Storage. The moment it came out in its entirety, it fell to the ground so heavily that it left a groove in the floor.

"It's absurdly heavy, as always. I can't hold it up with my own Strength stat, but I'm sure you'll be able to make good use of it."

The name of the shield was Dreadnought. After folding the metal in on itself again and again to increase its toughness, the end product had been a solid Rank A item. Incidentally, I hadn't chosen the name; my Smithing skill had set the shield's name all by itself. Once again: *I was not the one who chose the name.*

“Color me impressed! It seems to fit my hand like a glove. With this, I’ll be able to achieve even greater feats in battle as everyone’s shield!”

Gerard’s sword and armor were pretty much part of his body already, so there wasn’t anything I could do for them with my Smithing skill. That’s why I’d decided to make a new shield for him instead.

“Gerard-san, I also have a present for you,” chimed in Efil, passing him a bundle of blood-red fabric.

“This is a mantle! You made this for me, Efil? What incredible workmanship!”

“Its name is ‘Crimson Mantle.’ After all, Gerard-san is always up front protecting us. I made this hoping that it would be at least a little help to you.”

Oh wow, a mantle with elemental resistance. It looks like Efil’s Sewing has gone up another notch. Especially the resistance to fire damage! It reduces the incoming damage of it by half?! With Gerard’s high resistance to physical damage, this is going to make him even tankier.

The Sage’s Black Robe that I was currently wearing had also been made by Efil. It was a Rank B item — the same rank as Crimson Mantle — which provided me with a small amount of automatic MP recovery and a boost to spell power.

::Although it’s true that her Sewing skill has grown a lot, she’s also been working hard at practicing the craft. Even without the skill, her technical prowess has reached impressive heights.::

Guess I can’t let myself fall behind, now can I?

“Next is Clotho. In your case, keep this in your Storage.”



After carefully making our preparations, we set out for the Hidden Cave of the Sage. What looked like nothing more than a nondescript wooden hut in the middle of the woods actually sheltered a hidden staircase that led underground. Position-wise, the hut’s location wasn’t all that deep in the forest, so every once in a while, there would be a villager who accidentally stumbled across it.

There were four adventurer parties standing around the hut at present, warily keeping a lookout. I was familiar with every face there. All were Rank C, and this

gathering likely included the most powerful adventurers in Parth aside from me and my party. The mages present were busy maintaining sealing and protective spells on the hut, but whether any of that would be useful against this particular demon was anyone's guess. The atmosphere surrounding the hut was as tense as a taut bowstring.

"Seems they've set up quite the strict guard here."

"The Hidden Cave of the Sage isn't that far from Parth, my king. The measures they're taking seem prudent to me."

For this mission, I had Summoned Gerard in advance. With our opponent possibly being a Rank S threat, there was no telling what might happen. We needed our party's shield to be out and ready at a moment's notice. His appearance was that of a large suit of full plate armor, and his Status was Concealed. As long as he didn't do anything too crazy, his identity as a Black Spirit Knight would not be discovered. Although even if it were, I could gloss over it by claiming to be a Tamer.

"Some of the adventurers are heading our way."

I turned around at the sound of Efil's voice and, sure enough, I could see one of the four parties approaching us. They were still too far away for me to make out their faces, but my Presence Sensing indicated that it was Uld-san, the adventurer who had served as the examiner for Efil's Rank C promotion. He himself was also Rank C and, according to Ange, a veteran in the field. Regarding the outcome of the aforementioned exam...well, let's leave it alone for his dignity's sake.

"Heyyy, Kelvin! Glad to see that you've come too!"

"Uld-san, it's been a while."

"Good morning, Uld-san."

Both Efil and I exchanged greetings with our fellow adventurer.

"I'm glad to see you doing well, Efil. Last time we had a proper face-to-face was during your promotion exam, right? You two are the greatest up-and-coming adventurers that Parth has seen in all its history. We couldn't have asked for better reinforcements!" Rather than holding a grudge against us over

his instant knockout, the outcome of Efil's exam had apparently fueled his expectations of us.

Uld-san's appearance was that of a bearded macho man with a scary face. He used a battleaxe as his main weapon, but he actually had a very cheery and welcoming personality, which surprised me a bit. *During Efil's evaluation, the only exchange we had was listening to his introduction of the exam just before it began, after all. I guess you really can't judge people by their appearance.*

"By the way, who is this?" asked Uld-san, finally noticing Gerard standing behind us.

"My name is Gerard, and I'm Kelvin's comrade. I heard that a demon has shown up, so I came to help in any way that I can."

Ohhh, I didn't expect you to be capable of such a proper introduction, Gerard! Couldn't have imagined it based on how you normally act.

::My king, I was a proper knight when I was alive! Of course I know basic etiquette!::

So you're relaxed enough to make comebacks? Good, good.

"I can vouch for Gerard's abilities. In addition, his armor was made using materials from the recent Black Spirit Knight quest. Don't worry, you can rely on him."

I figured that if I claimed Gerard's armor was made of materials from the quest, no one would imagine him to actually *be* the monster in question. As the incident was still fresh in the minds of a number of those present, I thought it would be best to nip that in the bud.

"Is that so! If you're the one vouching for him then we can all rest easy."

"So, what's the situation here?"

"As you can see, we've cast a barrier around the hut and are standing guard. We have no idea how effective Crux Bind might be on a demon, but still."

Crux Bind was a Rank C White Magic sealing spell that was exceptionally effective against undead monsters like ghosts and zombies. By the same logic, it should theoretically apply to demons too. With the opponent being Rank B

even in the best case scenario, however, it was important not to be overconfident.

::If the demon is stronger than Rank B, Crux Bind is basically just a placebo. There are demons who can use White Magic too.::

Ah, I'd thought as much.

"Did you see the demon for yourself, Uld-san?"

"Nah, by the time I got here, the entrance was already sealed off. The guild's officially announced that they'll only allow Rank B and up to enter the place. There's nothing us C-rankers can do aside from standing guard outside."

The members of Uld-san's party were all around Level 30 or so. Within Rank C, they were considered the very best. However, the guild wasn't allowing even their group to go in. *Rio is definitely the one behind these precautions. Otherwise, he wouldn't have passed this quest on to me.*

"Hmm, so does that mean Efil and I aren't allowed inside either?" asked Gerard.

Uld-san glanced at him before turning back to me. "You're a special case, Kelvin. You're here because you received a quest directly from the guildmaster. Therefore, all of your party members can accompany you."

"Isn't that a relief, Master?"

Of course Rio's arranged everything ahead of time. That raccoon dog, it's been his intention to rope me into this from the start.

"In that case, Uld-san, please continue to keep a lookout up here. We'll go in and check this demon out."

"We have almost no information about the creature. Don't let your guard down for a moment."

After acknowledging Uld-san's advice with a nod, we headed towards the entrance to the Hidden Cavern of the Sage. Standing in front of the hut was a woman in mage-like attire who looked as if she had been waiting for us.

"Kelvin-sama, yes? I received word from Guildmaster Rio. We'll create a small opening in the Crux Bind barrier for you, so please enter through there."

“Got it.”

We ducked through the small gap, with Gerard leading the way, followed by me, then Efil. Once Efil had made it through, the hole was immediately sealed behind us.

“When you return, simply call out to us,” said the woman before moving a short distance away and sitting down in what appeared to be meditation.

“Well then, my king. Onwards?”

“Let’s. Both of you, stay sharp.”

“Yes, Master!”

Gerard placed a hand on the door of the hut, then carefully pushed it open. Together, we began our excursion into the Hidden Cavern of the Sage.



Inside the hut was a simple bed, a few empty shelves, and a bare desk. Everything looked very old and worn. Maybe the place had once held more of value, but with the discovery of the dungeon, everything must have been cleared away. It didn’t look like anyone had been living there for at least several years. The only thing of note was the hidden trapdoor in the floor that led underground.

“Go ahead.”

Gerard leaned down, grabbed the handle and pulled upwards. Screaming with a heavy-sounding creak all the way, the thick iron door slowly opened, releasing a musty smell that filled the room. I peered into the darkness below.

“This is the entrance to the dungeon? I can’t see a thing.”

Beyond the door was an inky blackness unbroken by any source of light. To proceed, we were definitely going to need the Night Vision skill, torches, or an illumination spell.

“Efil, light please.”

“Yes, Master. I’ll cast Lambent.”

Efil chanted Lambent, a Rank E Red Magic spell, which produced a small orb

of fire that lit up our surroundings. She sent the tiny fireball into the hole ahead of us.

“All right, so that’s taken care of visibility down there. Gerard will go in first, then me, then Efil. Clotho, take the rear guard.”

The miniature Clotho on Efil’s shoulder created a clone of its original size, transferring the majority of its strength over to it.

“Shall I go on, my king?”

“There’s nothing showing up within range of my Presence Sensing right now, but don’t let your guard down.”

“Please be careful, Gerard-san.”

Efil’s magical illumination revealed us to be in a tunnel that resembled a forgotten mine shaft. Following close behind Gerard, I continuously scanned our surroundings with Presence Sensing. If not for the darkness, Efil could have seen well into the distance with her Farsight, as she normally did. We weren’t so lucky this time but, thankfully, Rio had given me the specific route to our destination, so we did not have to worry about getting lost.

“There hasn’t been a single monster so far,” Efil noted after a while.

She was right. Although we had proceeded quite deep into the dungeon, we had yet to cross paths with a single enemy. In a normal dungeon, we would have had several encounters already.

“It might be an indication that something unnatural is going on here.”

It had been bugging me since I first entered the dungeon that I wasn’t getting any hits on my Presence Sensing. Monsters that would spawn in a Rank D dungeon were of no consequence to us at this stage, but having none appear at all was somewhat unsettling.

“What should we do? Should we turn back?”

“Nah, let’s at least take a look at the hidden room.”

We continued through the underground passage until finally reaching the chamber with the demon sealed inside. To the very end, our path remained completely devoid of monsters.

::Honey....::

“Mhm...beyond the door. I feel it.”

“So the demon’s in there, Master?”

Oh, it’s there all right. Problem is, there are two presences. One is most likely the bound demon, considering it hasn’t moved this whole time. The other feels quite different, but I can’t make out what it is. This is...a human? Wait, no, but...huh...

“The demon is in there, together with someone or something else. This second presence is probably the one that we should be paying attention to.”

“So, not the demon?”

“The demon is actually quite weak right now. It seems like the other one is the true threat to us.”

“What should we do about the subjugation quest, then?”

Good question. The target of the quest is the demon, so we won’t get the reward if we don’t kill it, but...

“Let’s prioritize neutralizing this other threat first. We can think about what to do with the demon after that.”

Depending on how things turn out, I might even be able to recruit the demon as a Follower.

“As you wish, my king.”

“Let’s do our best!”

I cast everyone’s buff spells, then drank a potion to recover my MP. *All right, we’re as ready as we’ll ever be.*

“The demon is in the middle of the room. The other presence, whatever it is, is just behind it. I’ll say this again: don’t let your guard down, any of you!”

With my command as the trigger, Gerard charged into the room and I quickly followed suit.

What first struck me was the sight of a drop-dead gorgeous woman, bound to a rack in the middle of the room, seemingly asleep. Her silky hair was a fiery

red, and so long and voluminous that it covered nearly her entire body. As the rest of her looked completely human, her distinctive black wings, spiked tail, and ram's horns stood out all the more, leaving no doubt that she was the demon.

Although her outfit was loose and coarse, her shapely curves still showed through, and it was easy to tell that she was quite blessed in a certain upper area. On top of everything else, the chains that bound her were digging slightly into her voluptuous body. Surely any healthy boy would have reacted favorably to the image. *If I wasn't used to seeing Efil, I might have been in danger too.*

::Honey, can you focus please?::

Don't worry, I know. This whole scene was just begging for comment, so I had to comply. Forgive me.

"What a strange sight..." murmured Gerard.

Right behind the beautiful woman were bones, bones, and more bones. A third of the room was buried under a whole mound of what appeared to be monster bones. *Is this why we didn't come across any monsters on our way here?* It was an incredibly surreal scene.



Crunch! Snap!

The sound of chewing echoed through the room. The aura emanating from behind the mountain of bones was so dark and heavy that we very quickly realized the culprit responsible for this scene of carnage was whoever — or whatever — was making those sounds from the other side.

Damn, I can't use Analyze Eye with all those bones in the way. Let's Analyze the woman first.

Just as I was about to activate the skill, however, the crunching sound that had filled the room suddenly died away.

"It seems my next meal has just arrived."

Speaking in a mechanical, dread-inducing voice, a figure emerged atop the horrible mountain of remains.



The creature now standing before us looked extremely bizarre. Its overall appearance was like a fusion of human and insect, sporting a black carapace and a huge head with a mouth that was so large it seemed to have evolved to make up for the absence of eyes. Proportionately large teeth glinted dangerously as our new acquaintance lifted the edges of his — *it is a "he," right?* — mouth in a smirk.

"Oh my. Oh my, oh my. Here I was, expecting more monsters to have wandered in, and it turns out to be humans instead. And rather powerful ones at that. Are you perhaps acquainted with the adventurers who so kindly broke the seal on this room for us?"

There was no longer any doubt in our minds that the calamitous scene surrounding us was the handiwork of this very individual. He also knew of the adventurers who had first discovered the room.

"Who are you? Are you with the demon lady over there?" I asked warily.

"You return my question with a question, I see. Well, no matter," he answered in a voice that grated on my ears. "Despite my appearance, I am actually quite the gentleman. If I know the answer, I shall deign to let you hear

it.”

It seemed the whole looking-down-on-us thing was helping to loosen the guy’s tongue.

“A gentleman? All I see is an insect walking on two legs.”

“Heh, so we have ourselves a jokester. I apologize for the late introduction. I am an archdemon, and my name is Viktor. Though our time together will be short, it is still my pleasure to have made your acquaintance.”

An archdemon?! If I remember correctly, that’s the name for a greater demon, right? If a lesser demon is generally at Rank B, then this guy’s strength would be...

“Hmm? You are smiling, it seems. Is something funny?”

Oops, guess I let it show on my face again.

As I covered my mouth with my left hand, I heard Gerard’s quiet sigh from beside me.

::My king’s bad habit is showing again....::

::A bad habit?::

::Oh right, you weren’t there when my king and I first fought. Well, you’ll see what I mean soon enough. For now, focus on the enemy::

::Hmm....::

Despite not understanding what Gerard was referring to, Efil cleared her mind, ready to fulfill her role at any time.

“Ah, no, don’t worry about it. So then, who’s she?” I asked, pointing at the beautiful woman who was showing no signs of waking.

“Her? Well, she’s...” The corners of Viktor’s mouth rose again before he simply said, “The Demon Lord’s daughter.”

At that moment, the door that we had come through slammed itself shut, and a barrier sprang up in front of it. *A trap, I guess.*

“Well, that wasn’t very gentlemanly, was it?”

“Oh my, looks like the mechanism must have been triggered all by itself somehow. But you look rather at ease for someone whose sole path of retreat has been cut off,” he snickered. “I’ve taken a liking to you.”

So this bastard plans on playing innocent to the end? This isn’t the time for that...did he just say “Demon Lord’s daughter”?

::There have been three Demon Lords in the past. The most recent one was Demon Lord Gustav. The color of this girl’s hair is indeed a very similar shade to Gustav’s famous red mane.::

Interesting. So what happened to that Demon Lord?

::This was during my predecessor’s time, so I didn’t see it in person, but supposedly the Hero of the age defeated him. I am not aware of there being any records of Gustav having had a daughter.::

Did the Demon Lord take measures to hide his daughter’s existence, or is she merely an imposter? Either way, it makes her too dangerous to leave alone. Let’s see how much more we can extract from this chatterbox.

I narrowed my eyes at Viktor. “To my knowledge, Demon Lord Gustav did not have a daughter.”

“Impressive deductive powers, human. I haven’t yet brought up my lord’s name, and still you figured it out by yourself. It seems you know your history, hm?”

Oh yes, our Melfina is a knowledgeable goddess.

“As you must know, the general historical account is that Demon Lord Gustav was struck down by a Hero and, without a child who bore his blood, his armies crumbled and scattered. However, that was, as it happens, my lord’s plan.”

“He hid the existence of his daughter as a precaution in case anything happened to him?”

“Correct.”

Melfina, is there any danger of this girl becoming the next Demon Lord?

::The possibility exists. She might be harboring great hatred towards humanity for killing her father.::

Which means we're going to have to take care of both Viktor and her, then.

"Now, back to my original question: are you acquainted with the adventurers who broke the seal on this room? Clearly, letting them go was the right choice after all. Even I hadn't expected such a powerful human to show up so soon. While cleaning the place up, I also cleared away all the monsters in the dungeon. I trust you had an easy time reaching us, yes?"

"Ah, so we've been baited into coming here. And these bones are all that's left of the monsters that were in this dungeon. Well, all right, we're here. What do you want?"

It was hard to determine what Viktor's goal was. Based on what he was saying, he seemed to be a subordinate of the previous Demon Lord, but he was spilling a lot of what sounded like very confidential information.

"Oh, it's quite an embarrassing matter, actually. You see, the chains binding My Lady are made so that only humans can undo them. As a demon myself, I can't even scratch them."

"So you want us to break the chains for you? Do you really think we'd be willing to do that after hearing everything you just said?"

"Oh, no, no, no, not at all." Viktor's presence abruptly turned hostile. "I want you to let me eat you so that I can 'borrow' your powers and do it myself."



The instant Viktor began emitting killing intent, all of us shifted into our battle stances.

"Do you know why I, a demon, provided such valuable information to you, a human?"

"I feel like you're going to tell me."

The demon stared down at us from the top of the bone pile, smirking slightly. "You see, my unique skill, Intemperate Feeding, isn't exactly the easiest to use. It allows me to absorb the characteristics of anything that I eat, but the process of eating yields minimal effects on its own. The closer the relationship with my target, or the more indebted my target is to me, the more effective the skill

becomes.”

In other words, he was sharing valuable information with us so that eating us will be more effective? “A skill that gives you strength for consuming someone close to you? That is pretty intemperate.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

But if that’s the case, we’re in a bit of a pinch here. I glanced at the mountain of bones. If the effects of the skill were truly as he described, it meant that he currently possessed the abilities of every single monster whose remains lay before us. They would all have been Rank D at best, but that was no reason to make light of it.

“All right, I understand your plan to eat us and gain the human trait to break the chains. For what, though? You want to unleash this girl upon the world as the next Demon Lord?” I asked, trying to buy some time by dragging the conversation on a bit longer. After all, if we were killed, the end result would be the same regardless, so I was hoping to pull every last drop of information from him first. I was also using this time to cast Analyze Eye and sort through the information acquired from that. *Hopefully I can gain enough time to have a detailed look at his skills.*

“Hm, you’re half right. If the chains are not destroyed, I cannot lay a finger on her.”

“Wait a moment, you’re not...”

“It seems you’ve already figured it out! Yes, I will absorb her with Intemperate Feeding and take her powers for myself! I am Viktor the Intemperate, one of the Four Demonic Generals, the one entrusted with the care of Sera-sama since her birth. In a way, I think of her almost as my own daughter. Which means that if I devour her, I will surely gain an incredible amount of power. With that power, I shall make this entire world my own, now, while the Heroes are weak and insubstantial. I will be the next Demon Lord!!!”

I would have been able to empathize to some degree if his goal had been to save his kin, but for betrayal, of all things? And Demon Lord Gustav, “Four Demonic Generals”? Your naming sense is a bit sad.

“Well then, that should be enough, don’t you think? I’m quite ready to start eating you all now. I kindly ask that you not resist!”

Viktor began to gather Black Magic around both of his hands. *Guess that’s all the info we’ll be able to obtain.* I threw the information that I had learned from Analyze Eye onto the Follower Network, allowing everyone to receive and understand it in an instant.

Viktor (670 y/o, Male, Archdemon, Cursed Pugilist)

Level: 86

Title: Plunderer

HP: 1,525/1,525 (+254)

MP: 883/883

Strength: 540

Endurance: 628 (+10)

Agility: 378 (+10)

Magic: 396

Luck: 437

Skills: Intemperate Feeding (Unique Skill), Pugilism (Rank S), Black Magic (Rank A), Danger Detection (Rank B), Armored Skin (Rank A), Elasticity (Rank B), Burrowing (Rank B), Dark Damage Resistance, Slicing Damage Resistance

Passive Effects: Intemperate Feeding [Sword Mastery (Rank E), Spear Mastery (Rank E), Red Magic (Rank F), White Magic (Rank F), Penetration (Rank F), Bloodsucking (Rank E), Covert Action (Rank F), Search (Rank E), Night Vision (Rank D), Herculean Strength (Rank F), Fortitude (Rank E), Iron Wall (Rank F), Acute Reflexes (Rank F)...]

::Well, I’ll be! How many monsters has he stolen skills from?! All right, everyone, even though our opponent is much stronger than us, I’ll be sure to defend the front line! I’ll be counting on all of you for support!::

::We’ve got your back, Gerard-san!::

When it came to battle, our Follower Network was astonishingly effective. All communication carried out through the Network was instantaneous.

::It looks like a lot of the skills he gained have been downgraded, at least.::

Yeah, he probably just killed and ate them without bothering to get to know them first. All right, guys, we've got to be careful not to damage Demon Lord Gustav's daughter. If we end up accidentally releasing her, Viktor might make a beeline for her, so stay on your toes.

"For starters, how about going to sleep?" I asked, unleashing what had already become my go-to spell, Air Pressure, at a strength that would have instantly crushed any Rank B monster to death. But while the contents of the massive bone pile beneath him crumbled and turned to dust, Viktor himself seemed unfazed. He leisurely approached us, still maintaining control of the Black Magic surrounding his hands.

"I am liking you more and more, human. It has been so long since I received a magical attack of such intensity."

"You look none the worse for it. I'm kind of shocked right now, actually." *This is my first time encountering a monster against which Air Pressure is so ineffective. So this is what a Rank S monster is like...*

"Are you *actually* shocked? It looks like you're smiling."

Ahh, damn, I let it show on my face again.

"Apologies. I've never met anyone as strong as you before. I can't help but feel a bit excited."

"Excited?"

::Honey's bad habit has come out again....::

::It has indeed.::

::Umm, what bad habit?::

Melfina and Gerard were enjoying their little banter at my expense, while Efil was the only one who didn't seem to understand. A figurative question mark almost seemed to be hovering over her head.

::During the Evil Sage Tree subjugation, and even the Armored Tiger one before that, we held the absolute advantage, so neither of those quests triggered my king's hidden urge. But when he fought me, what kind of face do you think he was making?::

::What...kind of face was he making?::

Gerard answered mirthfully, as if telling a joke. "He was grinning from start to finish. It seems when he fights someone truly strong, he can't hold himself back." I noticed that he made a point to offhandedly reference himself with the "truly strong opponents" part.

::So in other words....::

::Yes, he's a battle junkie through and through.::



Viktor made his way over to the Demon Lord's daughter, enduring my Air Pressure the entire way. "How about I show you all something interesting?" he asked, directing a hand towards the pile of bones behind him. With a short chant — "Hades's Army!" — the Black Magic gathered around his hand flew out and was assimilated into the skeletal mountain.

It took only a few seconds for us to see the effects.

Clack, clack, clack.

To our astonishment, the haphazardly scattered bones started gathering together and forming humanoid shapes one after another. All of them were wielding swords or spears that they had pulled out of who knows where. *Right, this would be Black Magic.*

"Well, thanks for the show. You really shouldn't have gone to the trouble, you know?"

"This should help to even the difference in numbers a bit," he snickered. "Let's see what you can do, shall we?"

With a slight wave of Viktor's hand, the skeletons rushed us all at once. According to Analyze Eye, each and every one of them had the strength of a Rank B monster. Considering the bones that made them up had come from

Rank D monsters, the spell must have been a very powerful one indeed. In the end, though, they were only cannon fodder, and certainly no match for us.

::Let's clear them out before they get too close!::

I unleashed Wind Shot, cast wide enough to cover the approaching wave of enemies. Each blade of air tore through the skull of a different skeleton, but there were just too many of them. It was like every single monster that had inhabited the Hidden Cave of the Sage had suddenly gathered together in this one room.

::We're going to have to fight while giving the demon girl a wide berth? That's going to need us to break a few bones, eh? Get it?::

Stepping forward to switch positions with me, Gerard swung his sword horizontally and shot off Gekou, the Area of Effect version of Agito. His swordsmanship was truly refined, and he cut a rather dashing figure. *If only he hadn't ruined it with that bad dad joke.*

::Puns notwithstanding, the attack was highly effective! *The pun notwithstanding!*::

Aside from the dad jokes, the power of Gerard's attack had even Melfina's approval. The flying slash that was Gekou hugged the ground, slicing through the legs of monster after monster like a knife through butter. With such large numbers of enemies packed so tightly together, the results were impressive indeed. His attack was so perfectly angled that the flying slash slammed straight into the ground right before it hit the Demon Lord's daughter.

::My king, I'll leave the rest to you!::

Got it!

As Gekou dissipated, I switched positions with Gerard, stepping up to pull off another Wind Shot that finished off the remaining stragglers.

::That went well, my king. It seems that's all the pawns taken care of::

The monster remains being used as Black Magic materials had all been pulverized. With the preliminary skirmish over, it was time for both sides to get serious.

“Oh, you lot are just great. Your individual strengths are indeed something, but what impresses me most is your teamwork. You move like a group of veteran warriors who’ve fought together for many years. How have you managed this at such a young age?”

Thanks to the Follower Network, this degree of cooperation is actually the norm for us.

“In spite of these compliments, you look entirely composed,” I noted. “You still believe that you’re speaking from a position of superiority, am I right?”

“So what if I am? It seems like this attitude fires you up even more,” sighed Viktor with a hint of confoundment in his voice. “You in the black robe, you’re quite the battle junkie, aren’t you? You’ve had that smile on your face since the start of our confrontation.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s kind of a sickness of mine. This is just so much fun, I can’t help myself.”

“Shall I erase that smile for you?”

With those words, Viktor slammed a fist wreathed in Black Magic into the ground. A thunderous explosion rocked the room, with the shockwave triggering a small cave-in at the entrance behind us. A huge cloud of dust billowed up, obscuring our view of the demon.

::A smokescreen?!::

Calm down, Gerard. I’ve already memorized his presence. He’s using the Burrowing skill to close in on us from beneath the ground right now.

Regardless of the lengths that someone went to, there was no hiding from me if I had already marked them with Presence Sensing. Not unless they were employing Covert Action as well as Efil could.

Amidst the roiling clouds of dust, Viktor approached us at high speed and leaped out of the ground right in front of Gerard. As he shot upwards, he swung his arm around in a terrible blow, the speed of which had been accelerated exponentially thanks to his Burrowing skill. Just before he managed to pull off the attack, however, his field of view was entirely filled with black.

“Hah!”

Gerard’s Shield Bash was a move that had plenty of destructive power in and of itself. And that was before he had upgraded to the preposterously tough Dreadnought shield. I would have died in one hit if I took such an attack head on. In this instance, Viktor’s own speed, gained from accelerating while underground, only served to increase the overall damage that he sustained. The perfect timing required to pull off this counter was possible thanks to the situational awareness that Mind’s Eye granted Gerard.

“Ooof!”

Viktor had clearly not expected this kind of response. He had thought he’d be the one launching a surprise attack, and had ended up on the receiving end instead. Flying backwards from the impact, he thrust his right hand towards the ground to steady himself.

“You’re not getting away!” roared Gerard, unleashing Agito as a follow-up.

All right, now an attack from me to press our advanta— Wait, no, something’s coming!

Using every drop of speed that I could muster with Sonic Boots, I immediately switched to evasive maneuvers. Just in the nick of time, too, as Viktor’s hand suddenly burst out of the ground. *He’s using Burrowing and Stretching together!* His hand followed me with ease, no matter where I ran.

“How about we kick this up a notch, eh?” After dodging Agito, Viktor exchanged blows with Gerard, using only his right arm while his left remained inside the ground.

Each clash between fist and greatsword scattered a shower of sparks through the air. Considering Viktor possessed both Armored Skin, a skill that deflected close-quarters attacks, and Slicing Damage Resistance, Gerard was at a definite disadvantage. Even so, he managed to hang in there through the skillful use of his shield. At this rate, though, it was only a matter of time before Viktor’s attacks would break through his defenses.

::Clotho, wrap!::

To break the stalemate, I issued a command to Clotho’s clone, who up until

then had been lying in wait in its smallest possible size. Viktor's left hand had become more or less defenseless as it had single-mindedly focused on trying to catch me. Clotho took advantage of this by latching on and instantly expanding to its greatest possible size, enveloping every part of the arm that was protruding from the ground.

"A slime?! Where'd that come from?!"

The slime that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere left Viktor reeling in shock.

"It seems like physical attacks don't work so well against you, so how about you try this on for size?"

Without further ado, Clotho began to absorb magic from Viktor at the fastest speed it was capable of.



"This is a rather rare slime species that you have with you!" Viktor said gleefully. "I admit this might be a rather disadvantageous match-up for me."

"Dammit, he went underground again!"

A split second after Clotho began its Absorption, Viktor abandoned his exchange with Gerard and jumped into the same hole that his left hand was in. The other end of the hand retracted into the ground at the same time. It was clear that he intended to drag Clotho's body down with him. Although Clotho had regained its full strength after having removed the entirety of its body from Storage, stats-wise it was still inferior to Viktor by several notches. At this rate, my slime was in danger.

"Like I'll let you!"

I chanted the Rank A White Magic spell Glory Sanctuary, with the section of Viktor's left arm that was still protruding from the ground as the target. It was the most powerful binding spell that I was currently capable of, and was one of my hidden aces. It applied a powerful binding effect to its target, with the amount of magic that was poured into the spell affecting its range. Within that range, members of the caster's party would even receive buffs to their Strength and Magic stats.

Common usage of the spell involved having other party members, preferably fully buffed, unleashing full-powered attacks upon the bound target. Supposedly, several court mages normally needed to work together to cast this one spell, but I was capable of doing it by myself thanks to the ridiculous amounts of MP that I had. Now, that obviously begged the question of exactly how much magic I was going to need to Summon Melfina if I still couldn't pull it off with my current stats. But...well, that was a matter for another day.

White, shining magic circles appeared, centered around Viktor's left hand, indicating the area within which the spell would be buffing our party members. The circles expanded until they covered a sizable portion of the room, looking like a stack of three rings floating in mid-air.

::Ohhh! As expected of my king!::

Living up to its rank, the spell succeeded in stopping Viktor's extended arm from making any further movements.

This is only capable of buying us a bit of time. I'll cast Vortex Edge on your greatsword, so make sure you sever his hand!

Contrary to how impressive the scene looked, Glory Sanctuary was barely maintaining its hold. Cracks had already begun to spread across one of the rings. I found myself once again marveling at just how powerful Viktor was.

::As you command!::

Gerard dashed into Glory Sanctuary's area of effect, holding in his hand a spell that had ended the lives of scores of monsters. Vortex Edge, the materialization of a raging gale that tore all creation into nothingness, was my most powerful option in terms of burst damage output. *Let's gamble on whether this will work against you and your Slicing Damage Reduction, Viktor!*

Crack.

I heard a faint sound behind me.

"You've let your guard down, haven't you?"

Viktor burst out of the ground. His right hand was wreathed in Black Magic and poised to thrust forward in attack. I didn't have to look twice to understand

that I would die instantly if I were to take the blow head-on. *Shit, I got so excited that I forgot to keep an eye on Presence Sensing!*

“It was a good match indeed. However, you coming at me three-against-one still wasn’t enough to change the fact that this was always going to be my victory!”

I whirled around, my face still fixed in a broad smile. “Three-against-one? Don’t you mean four-against-one?”

Efil, go ahead!

::Enemy in sight. Firing now!::

Efil, who had been waiting hidden until then, instantly let loose a Blaze Arrow. Before we entered the room, I had instructed her to activate Covert Action and keep an eye out for a clean shot at whoever or whatever our opponent turned out to be. To create such an opportunity, I had decided to act as the decoy.

Blaze Arrow, which Efil had also used during the Evil Sage Tree subjugation, was a special move that she’d created, focusing on penetrative ability. The explosive power of Red Magic was used to propel the arrow, while all of the scorching heat was clustered at the tip of the arrowhead, allowing it to melt its way through anything. If the target possessed regenerative powers, this attack had the bonus effect of interfering with that too. As such, it was most useful against enemies with abilities that were skewed towards defense.

Until the moment Efil actually shot her Blaze Arrow, there was no way Viktor could have known of her presence. She’d been hidden from view, and she had fired from his blind spot. In spite of that, Viktor managed to react immediately after the arrow left Efil’s bow. The hand that he was bringing down on me was instantly redirected to where the attack was coming from, and he even deployed a simple defensive spell in time. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say that it was likely his Danger Detection skill that had warned him.

“Aaagh!”

In spite of his incredible reflexes and as-yet unbroken armor, Blaze Arrow successfully managed to strike him. It tore through his hand first, then arm, then shoulder, burning and shredding as it went. By deftly shifting his body and letting his arm take the brunt of the attack, he had managed to avoid fatal

damage. His right arm, however, was now completely mangled. Very much aware of this, he quickly activated Burrowing again, leaving us no way of chasing him.

::I'm sorry, I failed to finish him off.::

::Don't feel down, lass! We'll be taking his left arm as well!::

That's right, we're far from done. Gerard was already next to the bound arm, just about to bring his Vortex Edge-clad sword down upon it. One of the rings of Glory Sanctuary had already crumbled, while the second was now halfway gone. The time window it had given us was dwindling fast.

“RAAAHHHH!”

Roaring at the top of his lungs, Gerard unleashed a fearsome attack with all the power he could muster. The instant sword met arm, the sound of metal on metal rang out several times in quick succession. Vortex Edge was trying to sever the arm like a chainsaw but the demon's armored limb was putting up a fight by sheer nature of its toughness. A shower of sparks even greater than when Gerard had been fighting Viktor one-on-one filled the air as the screeching of metal grew louder and louder.

Clang!

It felt like an eternity, but Gerard finally won the adrenaline-inducing exchange. His greatsword made a clean pass through Viktor's arm, severing it and sending it flying through the air. I very much wanted to let Clotho Absorb the arm, but we didn't have that kind of time at the moment, so I instructed my partner to throw it into Storage instead.

Good job! But the seal on the arm is now dispelled, so retreat back to our side!

With the arm gone, Glory Sanctuary faded away, the rings crumbling into nothing. The stump of the arm that had been bound by them disappeared into the ground. Presence Sensing showed Viktor burrowing his way to the opposite end of the room.

He's backed off for now. Keep your eyes on that spot.

::Understood, Master. As Covert Action has been dispelled, I will now shift

into providing long-range support fire.::

::My sword is still buffed with Vortex Edge. I will make our next clash the last.::

After a brief moment, Viktor re-emerged from the ground with a rasping laugh.

“The last time I was done in so badly was during the age of the previous Hero, I dare say. It seems that I, too, have been poisoned by the complacency of these peaceful times.”

Viktor had had his magic sucked away by Clotho, and was now missing both arms. By all accounts, he was only a small step away from defeat.

“So, are you going to surrender?”

“Surrender?” he laughed. “This early in the game? That sounds quite funny coming from a battle junkie such as yourself. Worry not, the true battle is only just beginning!”

A greater sense of pressure than anything we had felt so far assaulted us like a wave.

“Jin Scrimmage!”

Black Magic cascaded out of Viktor’s severed stumps, enveloping his entire body within moments. *Is this the most powerful Black Magic spell that he’s capable of?*

::Honey, go for it.::

No need to tell me twice. I’ll make sure to finish him off.

I readjusted my grip on the Verdant Staff.

Black Magic gradually sank into Viktor’s body, changing its shape. Now, if this had been a special effects *tokusatsu* show or an anime, I would have let him finish what looked like an epic transformation, but I had no such obligations in real life. *Let’s take advantage of this opportunity to get in as many hits as we can.*

::Master, now is the time!::

Efil had her bow up, with flames surrounding her nocked arrow, taking on the shape of a dragon's head. *Awesome, looks like Efil is thinking the same thing I am.*

After first unleashing Agito, Gerard was running towards Viktor, with Clotho close on his heels. Gathering the necessary magic, I threw a spell at the demon, who was still in the middle of transforming.

::Cleft Detonation!::

::Pyrohydra Primary!::

Cracks appeared in the ground, with a terrain-changing explosion bursting out almost immediately. This in and of itself was already a very destructive attack, but that wasn't all there was to the Rank B Green Magic spell. As a follow-up, bits of the ground rose up in the form of razor sharp teeth that attempted to clamp onto Viktor like the jaws of some gigantic roaring beast.

The arrow released by Efil was now clad in a dragon made of flames, capable of seeking out its prey as if it had a mind of its own. It wasn't a dragon as depicted in the West in my homeworld, but as depicted in the East, with a long, serpentine body that painted the fiery contrail of the arrow.

This special type of arrow, which Efil had named "pyrohydra," was endowed with a sensing function that enabled it to automatically pursue monsters. When she wanted to, however, she could control it manually. As such, this move was extremely useful for both offense and defense. The only fly in the ointment, so to speak, was that the arrow continuously drained her magic during use, so that was definitely an area that would need further improvement. For the moment, however, the dragon made of flames was slowly circling around Viktor.

The original idea had been for Cleft Detonation to destroy Viktor's legs, then for Agito to bisect him, with the dragon of flames ready to pounce down onto his head at a moment's notice. Any normal monster would have lost all morale and given in to despair in such a situation.

Damn. We were late by a split second.

There stood Viktor, unharmed by Cleft Detonation. He had been protected by a new pitch black armor that covered his entire body. The armor, which had

likely been the result of the spell he was casting, made his overall silhouette significantly larger, and even granted him disproportionately gigantic arms that were protruding from the stumps where his own arms had been.

At first glance, those huge hands of his looked heavy and unwieldy, but to our astonishment, he used a backhand to smack away Gerard's invisible Agito. Having had its direction altered at a sharp right angle, the attack sank into the wall at Viktor's side.

::He deflected Agito?! Where did those enormous arms come from?! Did he create them with that magic just now?::

Gerard, activate Loyalty at full strength.

::Are you sure, my king? I'll only be able to maintain it for a few minutes.::

That's how dangerous Viktor has become. It looks like he's aiming for a quick resolution to this fight.

Gerard's Unique Skill, Loyalty, was of the stats-boosting type. For a limited amount of time, this skill would buff Gerard's stats based on how loyal he was to the person he considered his lord. I had no way of quantifying Gerard's loyalty to me (in the first place, I didn't even think of myself as his lord), but something told me there probably wouldn't be a better time to use the skill.

"Hah, all ready for our last round?"

"As we'll ever be. Come at us with all you've got!"

Viktor took a step forward. He seemed to be gathering himself for a moment, but the next thing we knew, he was charging towards us at the speed of a bullet.

Gerard, emergency defense!

Stopping dead in his tracks, Gerard brought Dreadnought to bear, shifting into defensive mode with a single flowing motion in the span of a breath.

"Oh, you bet I will!"

Viktor's body began to barrel roll as he approached us at high velocity. The Black Magic that enveloped him expanded, giving his arms the ability to reach wall to wall. He took advantage of the transformation to lunge forward in an

attempt to mow us down.

He intends to wipe us all out in one go!

I reflexively cast the fastest defensive spell that I could manage: Earth Rampart. It was hard to imagine it being much use against a Rank S monster's charge, but I had to do whatever I could.

::Gerard, if you can't stop that attack, the entire party is finished. Block it with everything you've got!::

::My princess sure works her subjects to the bone!::

A sinister-looking wind picked up as the black mass continued to rush toward us, the shockwaves caused by its passing inflicting countless wounds upon the ground. Viktor soon crashed into the Earth Rampart, and just as expected, the wall merely crumbled with the impact, having had no visible effect on the demon's advance. Then Viktor and Gerard collided, black shield against black arm.

With his Loyalty skill at full strength, all of Gerard's stats had been temporarily boosted. Throughout the fight, he had managed to block and parry many of Viktor's attacks, so he was confident that he could do so again. It wasn't a presumptuous confidence but one based on experience. Since he had pulled it off in his natural state before, with Loyalty now activated and even buffed by spells from his king, he didn't see how he could lose this time.

::How can I call myself a knight if I fail here?!::

At the moment of the collision, with the absolute best timing, Gerard pulled off a Shield Bash. He threw everything he had into his counterattack, and fully expected to see Viktor flying back as he had the first time around.

However, his expectations were soon crushed. The demon murmured, "Well, that's rather imprudent of you."

A terrible impact assaulted Gerard. Although he had repeatedly told himself to never let go of his shield, the next thing he knew, he was empty-handed. Contrary to the outcome he had expected, the impact had almost completely shattered Dreadnought and knocked it clear out of his hands. The cost of having misread the oncoming attack was high. With his guard having been forced wide

open, Gerard could only watch as death approached.

::Gerard-san! Don't give up!::

Efil's voice over the Network snapped Gerard back to his senses. By the time he felt its presence, Efil's pyrohydra had already roared past him, flying with deadly purpose.

::Let's do this together!::

::Right-ho. There's still much that I need to do. This....:: Shifting into a two-handed grip on his greatsword, he roared out loud, "This is still the beginning of our story!!"

The pyrohydra clamped on like a vice, even as Gerard swung his sword with every last drop of power that he possessed. Thanks to the effects of Crimson Cloak, the damage that Gerard was taking from standing in such close proximity to a burning opponent was insignificant.

However, their combined attack was insufficient to fully sever Viktor's arm. Gerard fell, completely spent, just as the pyrohydra was reduced to nothing but sparks. Even so, their efforts were enough to push the arm back.

It's not over yet! He's still coming at us!

The party's joy was short-lived, and the fight wasn't over yet. Having leaped back into the air, Viktor had appeared to lose his balance for a moment, but he was still closing in on Gerard, who was now lying motionless on the ground.

::Pyrohydra Secondary!::

Efil had gathered her magic without hesitation, and now released a second attack. Upon leaving her bow, the dragon roared towards the demon in a straight line.

"You guys truly don't know how to give up!" Viktor commented as he threw a straight punch. What made the strike special was that he was still in midair when he threw it, and his arm had limitless reach thanks to his Elasticity skill. With a *whoosh* — a sound that normally wouldn't be associated with a punch — his fist swung straight towards the incoming projectile.

I grinned with exhilaration. "Well, we have every confidence that we can beat

you!”

The collision of fist against arrow left the latter scattered into pieces yet again. However, during that small window of contact, something had flown out from the pyrohydra.

“This is...your slime again?”

Viktor had caught on quickly; it was indeed a Clotho clone who had appeared. The main body, still sitting on Efil’s shoulder, had created another clone. Although the clone’s stats were considerably weaker, it had full use of Clotho’s skills — the most important one being access to Storage.

Let him have it all, Clotho!

Various cursed weapons were rapidly ejected from Storage. They were the failed products of my smithing practice — all quite powerful, but carelessly using any of them would cause the wielder to be afflicted with terrible curses. As such, I couldn’t very well sell them or use them myself. When I was considering what to do with them, the idea of having Clotho use them as projectile weapons had come to mind. Simply keeping them in Storage wouldn’t cause the slime to suffer any of the curses.

Taking advantage of the short window of time during which Viktor was left unguarded as he tried to pull his extended arm back, Clotho rained a squall of these cursed weapons onto him from point blank range. I didn’t even have to use Analyze Eye to tell that, just as planned, Viktor had indeed been cursed. As evidence...

Pang!

Viktor’s arms, as well as the armor enveloping his whole body, shattered.

“Radiance Lance!”

Without delay, I cast the Rank B White Magic spell — the fastest lance-type spell I knew. Matching my timing, the large Clotho clone also opened its mouth for a Mortality Beam, while Efil loosed a Blaze Arrow.

“Aaaahh, so it’s my loss...” murmured Viktor as the three attacks simultaneously tore through his body.





Recovery Circle.

After the fight with Viktor ended, I healed everyone in our party back up. Although there had been several moments where we were hanging on by the skin of our teeth, in the end, none of us had suffered any major injuries. We had faced off against a close aide of the previous Demon Lord and come out of it largely unscathed, having clinched a victory. I was more than happy with the results.

“Well then. You still alive?” I asked, looking at Viktor, the very individual with whom we had been locked in fierce battle mere minutes before. His temporary arms were gone, there were three gaping holes in his body, and he was lying face up on the ground. He was clearly on the verge of death.

“Yes, I am...unfortunately, it seems I am still drawing breath...”

“So you are.”

All the haughtiness he had displayed during our initial encounter was gone. In its place was only the pensiveness of someone coming face to face with the end of a long, long life.

“But before you go, there’s something I want to ask you,” I said.

“What...is it?”

“From the very beginning, you actually had no intention of eating the woman that you called the Demon Lord’s daughter, did you?”

This was something that I had noticed halfway through the fight. Every time Viktor unleashed an attack, he’d made sure that it didn’t hit the bound demon. Early on, he had said that no attack of his could destroy the seal or even touch the woman, as he did not possess the human trait. I highly doubted that he had forgotten that fact.

He forced a chuckle. “You...really have a sharp eye...”

“Why did you lie to us? I can’t see how it benefits you in any way.”

“If I hadn’t...you wouldn’t have come at me...in full force, would you? I was

entrusted...by Gustav-sama...”

Viktor’s words were slow to come now.

“I...probably do not have long left. I’ll keep it short, but allow me to...share with you...the story of the previous era’s Hero and Demon Lord...”



Demon Lord Gustav was a tyrant. He was extremely ambitious, and once he became a king, he invaded his neighboring countries again and again, spending every day reveling in the fervor of war. Eventually, the rest of the world started calling him a Demon Lord, and the Hero-summoning Ritual was performed when a call to overthrow him went out across the land.

His tyrannical nature led to even his own men fearing him, but there was one person with whom Gustav could be his true self: Sera, his beloved daughter. With his days mired in war and his wife having passed away, the degree to which he loved and doted on his daughter was striking, to say the least. He never let her outside, not even once, and took every measure to hide the knowledge of her existence from all but his closest retainers. As such, Sera did not know the world, and spent her life speaking only to a limited number of demons.

When the Hero reached the Demon Lord’s Castle with a huge host in tow, Gustav was convinced of his impending defeat. The Four Demonic Generals had all been struck down at different battlefields, with the only one left being Viktor, Sera’s dedicated caretaker. The forces at Gustav’s disposal were dismally insufficient. He did not lament the loss of his country or his own life, but was filled with misgivings about the safety of his daughter. The Hero was already at their door. If Sera’s existence was discovered, she would surely be chased down and killed without a second thought.

As a desperate measure taken in the eleventh hour, Gustav bound his precious daughter with a spell and locked her up in a teleportation room. The effects of the spell caused her body to become frozen in time and made her fall into a deep slumber. The instant that Gustav died, the magic circle in the room would activate automatically and send her to a hidden location. At the same time, the activation of this mechanism would form the chains that made Sera’s

binding unbreakable except by a human. The Hero wasn't the only threat to her; she would also make for a very desirable target for monsters and other demons. Therefore, Gustav decided on humans, the weakest race overall, to be the trigger for her release. Although she wasn't quite at Viktor's level, she was still rather powerful among demons. As long as it wasn't the Hero who found her, her chances at escaping alive after being found were quite high.

Before heading off to face the Hero, Gustav ordered Viktor to serve as Sera's guard. Viktor himself wanted very much to fight alongside Gustav, and voiced his discontent accordingly. However, the instant he saw Gustav's face, the moment he beheld the tender expression of a father, which he had never before seen on the face of this Demon Lord who commanded such fear and terror from all, Viktor found himself unable to utter another word. He accepted Gustav's orders and set off for the hidden location where Sera was to be teleported to.

It was two days later that news of the Demon Lord's death at the hands of the Hero finally reached Viktor's ears. Repressing his heartache, he somehow managed to arrive at the hidden location without being discovered. However, what he found was a hidden door underground that he could not open. Just like the seal on the chains, this door had also been set up so that it could only be opened by humans. In addition, it was very cleverly hidden, so much so that even professional adventurers would have had a hard time noticing it. Viktor could only sit and wait for an adventurer to stumble upon the place and unseal it.

He had passed a long, long time lying in wait. By all appearances, there was only a common shack up top, which hardly helped the chances of drawing someone's attention, much less getting them to find the trapdoor that led underground. Viktor could have kidnapped someone and forced them to open everything, but doing so would have risked the Hero hearing about it. Therefore, he decided to wait until a time when the Hero was no more. Humans had limited lifespans, after all, so Viktor waited, and waited, and waited.



"Until finally, this new age came. Countries went to war, but...their wars were mere child's play...compared to that of my Lord's..."

The place was eventually discovered as an underground dungeon, and finally, adventurers happened to open the door. Viktor stayed hidden, waiting for someone with actual skill to show up so that he could eat them, free Sera, and abscond with her.

“And yet, look how awry...my plans became...” Viktor coughed up some blood before continuing. “I have a request...would you accept Sera-sama...as your party member and comrade...?”

“I’m...totally fine with it. But what brought that on?”

“You...are strong...and you are trusted by your comrades...monsters, too, it seems...” Viktor shot a look at Clotho and Gerard.

“Clotho I get, but you realized that Gerard is a ‘monster’ too?”

“After exchanging all those blows...I could tell immediately...right, Summoner-san?”

So he figured it out...

“Sera-sama has never...left the castle...if possible, please...let her see the world...”

“I’ll make the offer, but I can’t guarantee she’ll agree, all right?”

The edges of Viktor’s mouth lifted slightly in a smile. “She will agree...for sure. She...has a very...inquisitive mind. And besides, with how...loudly we were fighting...I believe...her consciousness has already...woken up...”

“What? She’s awake?”

“As soon...as you undo her binding...she should open her eyes...immediately. She’s probably...also listening to this conversation...”

::He is not lying::

Thanks for checking, Melfina.

“What about you, though? Would you be interested in becoming my Follower too? If you want, I could heal you up right now.”

“A truly attractive offer...but my Lord is Gustav-sama alone...in any case, it’s already too late...”

Viktor looked like he was having trouble holding on to consciousness.

“Heh...how funny...for a demon...to be making requests...but if you feel like it...I leave her...in your hands...”

His last bit of strength drained away, and Viktor fell limp. At the same time, a fanfare rang out inside my head.

“I leveled up...”

Most likely due to the difference in our levels, I had earned a massive amount of XP from the victory. The fanfare continued to ring on and on, but somehow, it sounded a bit hollow.

“Well then, let’s free this Sera person, shall we?”

“Are you sure about this, Master? Didn’t Melfina-sama say there is a chance this girl could become the next Demon Lord?”

Efil’s concerns were warranted.

“Well, as it turns out, I’m a pretty sentimental person,” I replied with a sigh. “It seems I really am bad at following through with things...”

All it took was for me to touch the chains and they shone with a bluish white light before shattering and falling away.

“Hey, can you hear me?”

The red-haired demon slowly opened her eyes...

“Both Father and Viktor are such idiots!!!”

...and started bawling her eyes out.





All of us emerged from the Hidden Cavern of the Sage and climbed back up to the rundown hut. *I'm so exhausted that I just want to dive into bed and sleep...*

Contracting with Sera had taken quite a bit of effort, but I'd managed it in the end. As for why it had taken so much work...well, it was because she just couldn't stop crying. After waking up, her tears had flowed nonstop, several centuries of pain and grief hitting her all at once. The rest of us did everything we could think of to calm her down. We practically spent as much energy on it as we had during the fight with Viktor. *Which reminds me, my first encounter with Efil pretty much went the same way, didn't it?*

Eventually, I was able to bring up the matter of the Contract, and got her consent for it.

"Sniff...okay, I agree..."

There we go, Contract formed.

Despite her appearance as a beautiful lady, my impression was that her mental age was still rather young. It made sense, after listening to Viktor's account of how sheltered Demon Lord Gustav had kept her. Then there was also the fact that I didn't know at what age demons matured into adults.

At the moment, I was carrying Sera on my back, and she was still crying. I enjoyed the sensation of her breasts on my back, but very much did not enjoy the continuous sobbing right into my ear. *If she could just start walking by herself sometime soon...*

The reason it was me giving Sera a piggyback ride and not Gerard was that he was currently incapable helping. To be more specific, he was on the verge of Evolving, so it was taking everything he had just to walk. The plan was to have him hold on until we got out of sight, at which point I would Unsummon him.

Upon noticing us, the mage managing the barrier looked up from her meditation. "Looks like you're back — hey, who's that lady?"

"We successfully subjugated the demon. It seems it was possessing this woman when it was bound, and she was trapped together with it," I replied,

following the cover story that I had hashed out with Melfina and the others beforehand.

The adventurers who had first discovered the hidden room had seen Sera's form, so if we said nothing, people would draw the conclusion that she was a demon. Since she was going to join our party, having such rumors about her floating around would be rather troublesome. What with her being the daughter of the previous Demon Lord, it seemed like a no-brainer that we should keep her identity a secret.

"Is that true?! Have you truly subjugated the demon?! That's right, proof! Do you have any proof?!"

"This is the proof. If you have someone with Analyze Eye examine it, I'm sure it will confirm our claim."

I handed the woman a piece from Viktor's carapace. I felt somewhat apologetic towards him, but we had to paint him as the demon who had possessed Sera. With this, our account would check out. As for Viktor himself, we had already given him a burial and even performed a memorial service for him.

::M-My king, I...can't hold on much longer....::

You were the one who said it, right? "How could a knight keep a crying lady waiting?!" wasn't it? I told you I didn't mind if you waited a bit before Evolving, didn't I? Take some responsibility for your own words.

::Y-Yes, my king....::

You can do it, Gerard.

To our relief, Sera was in possession of an item that alleviated our worries about her horns and wings. The "Clip of Camouflage" that her sidetail was tied with had the effect of hiding the physical characteristics that differentiated her as a demon, in effect allowing her to pass as a normal human. I had no way of knowing for sure whether Demon Lord Gustav gave her the item with the assumption that things might turn out this way, but considering Viktor's account of how much he doted on his daughter, I wouldn't have been surprised if that were indeed the case.

“She’s grown very weak, so we’re going to go ahead and bring her back to Parth. Can we leave the clean-up to you guys?”

“Of course, we’ll take care of it. The poor girl, she’s crying so much...everything’s going to be okay now. You can rest easy, all right?”

Luckily, the mage’s misunderstanding of the situation worked in our favor. We decided to take advantage of the opportunity to make a quick exit.

After passing through the magical barrier surrounding the hut, we made our way to the clearing where Uld-san and the other Rank C adventurers were standing guard. As expected, he and his party rushed towards us, which prompted the others to look over as well.

“Oh, you’re back safe and sound! Wait, what’s with the beauty, Kelvin? And your knight friend also looks quite the worse for wear! Did you guys get done in by the demon?!”

Uld-san peppered us with questions. It was clear to see that they came from a place of concern, but it was really not the best time for all that.

::Ughhh...I feel like something might be coming out....::

Right, we don’t have time for this!

“Uld-san, I’ll fill you in later! Gerard is in a really bad state right now from our fight with the demon. To heal him, I’m going to need a special medicine that I’ve left back in Parth. So sorry, but we’re going on ahead!”

After spitting out a volley of words at a speed that surprised even myself, I continued running on past.

“Hey, Kelv—”

Sorry, Uld-san, but later! Gerard, run carefully so you don’t jolt yourself!

At top speed, our entire party dove into the forest and out of sight.



Eventually, we found ourselves back on the road to Parth.

::Phew, all refreshed. I was really worried about what would happen for a while back there.: *That’s the first thing you say after Evolving?*

Having been Unsummoned in the nick of time, Gerard had completed his Evolution within my magic pool. His race was now “Hades Knight Captain” which, according to Melfina, was a unique subspecies of the Hades Knight race that could be found in Rank S dungeons. Very much living up to the name, Gerard’s black armor had grown even fancier and tougher than before, and his stats now matched what Viktor’s had been. In a surprising turn, the Dreadnought shield that had been destroyed had reappeared in his right hand, having been similarly strengthened and transformed.

::Mwahaha, this is the fruit of my dedication to the Way of the Knight!:: *All I could see was an old geezer trying to hold in his pee...*

Honestly, there was no better way to describe what he looked like near the end.

“Oh, hey there, you’ve stopped crying, Sera.”

“Mmm...”

I suddenly noticed that Sera was quietly listening to our conversation. As she had officially become one of my Followers, she should already have been capable of telepathic conversation, but I decided to speak out loud to give her some time to grow accustomed to it first.

Apparently, Efil had the same thought. “How do you feel, Sera-sama?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for worrying about me, umm...”

“My name is Efil. I am Master’s slave and maid.” Efil lifted the edges of her skirt and curtsied gracefully.

::I’m Gerard.::

::And my name is Melfina.::

Everybody exchanged greetings, and Clotho bounced cheerfully on Efil’s shoulder a few times.

“As I mentioned during our talk about the Contract, my name is Kelvin.”

“I’m Sera. Thank you for having me. As you’ve already heard from Viktor, I’m Demon Lord Gustav’s daughter. Uh...it might be a bit late to ask this, but are you sure about accepting me as a Follower?” asked Sera worriedly from behind

my shoulder.

“Oh, we’ll manage. You might not guess it from how I look, but I have the Concealment skill at Rank S. At the very least, nobody will be able to discover your secret with Analyze Eye.”

“You’re strong enough to defeat Viktor and now this too? Who *are* you? You’re not a Hero, right?”

“The Heroes are elsewhere, don’t worry. I’m just your average adventurer who kind of enjoys fighting.”

::Kind of?::

::Kind of?::

::Kind of?::

Did you guys really have to harmonize on that?

“Haha, you guys are funny. And you all worked so hard to comfort me when I was crying, too.”

“You’ll get used to it soon. Oh, there’s Parth. Your clip is properly activated, right?”

“It’s working just fine. Oh, but...”

“Something the matter?”

Sera stammered a bit. “I’ve...never been in a city before. The farthest I’ve gone outside was the castle garden...”

“Are you feeling nervous?”

“A bit...maybe.”

Well, makes sense, I guess. She was raised hidden from the world, after all. Which reminds me, despite having been crying the entire time, she kept an eye on the mage lady and Uld-san while I was talking to them. Maybe she’s a shy person.

“For now, we’ll enter the city, then head straight to our inn. I’ll carry you the whole way, so take all the time you need to get used to the air and the sights.”

“Mm, thank you.”

“Don’t worry, Sera-sama. Everybody’s really nice!”

“I-I’ll do my best.”

Guess it’s going to take some time. Without bringing any more attention to Sera’s nervousness, our party continued to make its way towards Parth.



Once we entered the city, Sera found herself in a highly excited state. It was her first time in such an environment and her first encounter with crowds, and everything looked curious and unusual to her.

“Kelvin, what’s that?”

“A fruit store. At this time of year, there are a lot of really sweet fruits.”

“What about that?”

“A weapons store. Those shops sell everything from your standard swords to staves used by mages. Ever since I took up smithing, I haven’t really needed to go to them, though.”

“You can smith, Kelvin?! Even though you’re a Summoner?”

“If possible, I like to fight up close. Unfortunately, my Strength stat isn’t really going up, so I have to struggle quite a bit.”

“You’ll have to make up for it with technique, then. I’ll teach you! In exchange —”

“Don’t worry, I intended to make a weapon for you right away. We’ll be counting on you as a party member from now on, so ready yourself!”

“Sweet! Hold on, Kelvin, what’s *that* store?”

In this manner, Sera bombarded me with questions the entire way. She might have looked like a big child from a third party’s perspective, but...well, this was far preferable to her being nervous.

Sera had already changed out of her ragged clothes into a normal-looking outfit made by Efil. After all, she certainly would have stood out if she’d remained in her original getup. During a break on our way back to Parth, Efil

had taken Sera's measurements and proceeded to use her Sewing skill to whip up an outfit that, in spite of being made on the spur of the moment, turned out to be a Rank C item. The outfit was even tailored with holes for Sera's wings and tail to pass through, even if they were hidden thanks to the Clip of Camouflage. *Efil, your proficiency has grown yet again.*

"You sure seem to be enjoying this."

"It's my first time outside! Of course I'm enjoying it. A city is pretty much the embodiment of all the things I've only read about in books before! The only difference being that the residents are not demons, of course."

The version of Sera who was shrinking into herself before we entered Parth was no longer anywhere to be seen. *Looks like she'll be okay after all.*

Efil and I continued to field her questions, and found ourselves at the Fairy's Song before we knew it.

"Efil and Sera, you two go rest up. I'll drop by the guild to make our report first."

"If Master is going, then I'll —"

"We can't very well let Sera be by herself, can we? I'll also leave word with Clare-san, so please attend to Sera in the meantime."

I could have just Unsummoned her, but I thought it a good opportunity for Sera to get used to interacting with people outside of our party.

"Geez, I'm not a child, all right?"

"Very well, Master. I will take good care of her."

"Uh, you listening to me, Efil? I'm technically older than you, right?"

Sera looked slightly miffed, but we had no other choice. Honestly, if I brought her along while appearing in front of Rio, I wasn't confident that I could hide her identity from him. If there was one thing that I'd learned from dealing with the guildmaster, it was that older people with a wealth of life experience possessed almost supernatural mental capabilities. *Maybe I should consider getting a skill related to negotiation next.*



When I got back to the Fairy's Song after delivering my report to the guild, I found the adventurers inside all gathered together. Wondering what was going on, I looked around and found Efil and Clare-san in the kitchen cooking up a storm. Sera was sitting at the head of a table, at the center of the crowd. *What is this?*

Before I even had a chance to voice my question, someone answered from right behind me.

"It's your celebration party for reaching Rank A, Kelvin!"

"WHOA! Oh, it's you, Ange. Wait, how long have you been there behind me?"

It was true that I had Presence Sensing turned off, but to sneak up behind me without a sound...*could it be that she's actually an adventurer too?*

"Ahaha, I got to see Kelvin's surprised face! Looks like my luck is really good today!"

"All right, all right, you got me. Any chance you possess the Covert Action skill?"

"Hahaha, of course not. It's just a difference of basic specs between you and me, Kelvin-kun."

"You sure know how to talk, eh? So, how do they know about my promotion? I only just learned of it myself."

After I had delivered our account to Guildmaster Rio, he had pronounced me ready for promotion to Rank A. Apparently, if the demon this time had turned out to be higher than Rank A, the subjugation quest was meant to serve as my promotion exam. Naturally, I had not heard a thing about this beforehand.

Damn, you really were Rank S, Viktor?

Ange laughed happily. "I was so excited about it that I told Clare-san right away! Then things just ended up snowballing."

"You've abridged the entire story!"

Abruptly, Sera's voice came over the Network. ::K-Kelvin! S-Save me! A ton of humans that I don't know are talking to me!:: *Oh hey, looks like Sera's figured out how to communicate telepathically.*

Her face was as red as her hair with embarrassment and she was quite flustered, but otherwise looked fine.

::No, really, please save meee!::

Mental maturity aside, her appearance was that of a drop-dead gorgeous woman. It made sense that she would stand out and that people would want to talk to her. *True, the intention was to have her get used to people, but this might be a bit much. Let's lend her a hand.*

"Efil, Sera, I'm back!" I said, purposely raising my voice a bit.

"Ah! Welcome back, Master!"

When Efil noticed me and turned to bow to me, the adventurers who had been solely fixated on Sera all turned in my direction as well.

"Hey, guys, Kelvin's here!"

"Kelvin-san, I heard the news! Congratulations on being promoted to Rank A!"

"Who is this pretty lady, you bastard?! Is Efil-chan not enough for you?!"

"Oh my god, can I have your autograph please?"

The adventurers shifted the focus of their attention from Sera to me and bombarded me with questions.

"Whoa, where did all this come from?!"

"Isn't it obvious, Kelvin? You are the first adventurer in Parth's entire history to have reached Rank A. Right now, you're an icon in the eyes of all the adventurers of this city!"

"Seriously?" *It's my first time hearing about this, too...*

"Oh, tonight's guest of honor has arrived? Kel-chan, I've already heard about your promotion!"

"Congratulations, Master!"

Having finished making their last dish, Efil and Clare-san made their way out of the kitchen.

"I only learned of it just now myself. Looks like Ange's way ahead already."

“Ahaha, sorry not sorry!”

“Oh, go easy on her, Kel-chan. She did it for your sake, right? Tonight’s feast is our crowning achievement. Enjoy it to your heart’s content!”

“That’s right, Master. And I’m confident that tonight is the night my cooking has finally surpassed Clare-san’s!”

“Hah, I’ll make you swallow those words of yours!”

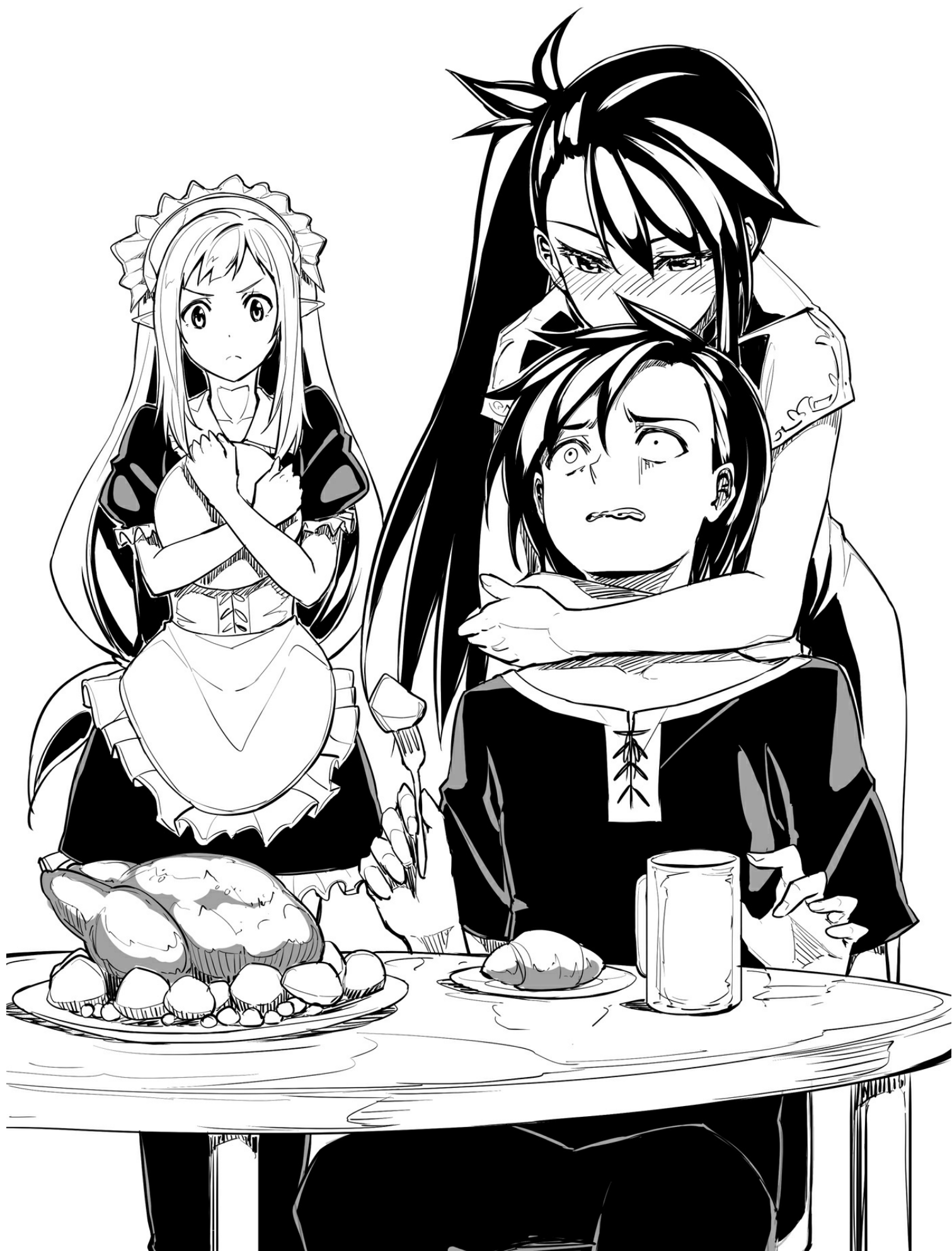
What, are you guys going to start a cooking tournament or something?

“Kelvin!”

All of a sudden, Sera’s arms wrapped around me from behind.

“Why did you leave me?! What with Efil going off to cook and a whole bunch of people surrounding me, I was really lonely!”

I almost heard my neck creak from the strain. *Stop that, Sera! It’s no laughing matter if you squeeze me so hard — not with how strong you are!*



“Ohhh, you two are already that close?”

“That’s Kelvin-san for you! The speed at which he gets girls is truly second to none!”

“What is this?! Kelvin-san, don’t you already have Efil-chan?!”

“Can you write ‘To Suzu-chan’ when you sign the autograph for me, please?”

People were talking and making a ruckus all around me, but nothing was entering my ears. *My consciousness...*

Right in the nick of time, a voice from heaven — *wait, no, it’s Uld-san’s voice* — cut in. “Hey, young woman, Kelvin’s going to die if you keep that up, you know?”

“Oops! S-Sorry!”

I was finally released from Sera’s chokehold. *I think that was actually the closest I’ve been to dying since coming to this world...*

“Thank you for that, Uld-san. You literally just saved my life.”

“Well, that might be a bit of an exaggeration...”

If you knew Sera’s stats, you would know it was not an exaggeration at all.

“Oh, hubby, you’re back?”

“Yes, I am. Sorry for being away so long.”

“It’s just the usual, eh? Don’t worry, I’m not bothered by it.”

“Wait, please be at least a little bit bothered? Please?”

The conversation that had started up between Clare-san and Uld-san almost sounded like a husband and wife’s comedy act — *wait, husband and wife?*

“Umm, could it be that Clare-san’s husband...is Uld-san?”

“Hm? That’s right. Did I not tell you, Kel-chan?”

“I’ve been living here for quite a while, and this is my first time hearing of it.”

Uld-san, aren’t you away from home a little too much?

“Hahaha, well, after Efil’s promotion exam, I was hospitalized for a while.”

Oh my god, it was my maid's fault?! Please accept my deepest apologies!

“Setting that aside, I heard the news. You got promoted to Rank A —”

“Hubby, a whole lot of people have said the same thing to him already, so let's just move on, all right?”

“I can't even congratulate him?!”

A wave of laughter roared up. With that, the comedy act was broken up, and the food was carried out from the kitchen.

::My king, may I join in too?::

Hm? Can you?

It was the first time that Gerard had ever asked to come out during a meal with other people around.

::Actually, I've gained the ability to materialize a physical body thanks to my Evolution.:: *Oh, hey, good for you!*

::Indeed. Now I can finally taste Efil's cooking!:: *Uh, that's the first thing you think of?*

::But I'll never take off my armor, all right? My armor is my soul!:: *Uh...sure. Take care not to get food on your armor when you eat, I guess...*

And with that, it seemed Gerard would be joining in on the feast.

::Honey, you think you're about ready to Summon me yet? Maybe give it a try?:: ::I can't very well do it right now, can I? Want me to give it a try tomorrow?:: ::But Efil's cooking....::

To have stolen a goddess's heart so...what is Efil's cooking supposed to be, sinful temptation?

“Kel-chan, we're all good to go. Should we get started?”

“Sure, I don't mind.”

Before I knew it, all the preparations had been completed.

“All right then, hubby, lead the toast.”

“What? Me? Really?”

Uld-san looked slightly taken aback at being called out so suddenly.

“I could not ask for anyone more suitable, Uld-san. Please.”

After all, he was the person who had saved my life.

“You sure? Ahem...well then, to the pride of our city, Parth’s first adventurer to ever be promoted to Rank A, Kelvin! Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Bang!

“Oh, goodness gracious, I missed the toast!”

Having been Summoned in the alleyway outside of the inn, Gerard barged into the room just slightly late to the festivities.

Side Story 1: Demon Lord Gustav's Daughter

This is the story of something that happened several centuries ago, in a country of demons somewhere in this world. The king of that country, Gustav Baal, reigned as an overbearing tyrant. This man, who would go down in history as a Demon Lord, treated the invasion of his neighboring countries as a pastime, and was feared by both allies and enemies as the most demonic of all demons. He granted death to those who opposed him, and terror to those who submitted. It was in this manner that Gustav continuously expanded the territory that he ruled.

“Father, look, look! I leveled up from my training session just now! I’m so close to being Level 50!”

However, even this man had someone that he completely doted on: Sera, his beloved daughter. Around this time, she was ten years old, and the imposing stance that she was adopting, with legs spread, arms crossed, and a proud look on her face, suited her very well. The two of them were in a secret mansion, hidden deep below the main castle. A very limited number of people knew of its existence, much less had permission to step inside.

“Is that true?! What joyous news indeed! My Sera is a genius, no doubt about it! Viktor! Get to preparing a feast right now!”

“A thousand pardons, but if I may, Gustav-sama, did we not already host a feast yesterday celebrating ‘The First Time Sera-sama Ate Her Bell Peppers’? How many consecutive days would this make —”

KA-BOOM!

“Spare me your bullshit logic and get to cooking already!”

“S-Spoiling should be done in moder— Ugh! In moderation, if I may...”

The one who had just taken a straight right hook from Gustav and ended up crashing into a wall with enough force to put a crack in his carapace was none other than Viktor, his loyal retainer. In the future, Viktor would grow powerful

enough to put up a fight against the Hero as one of the Four Demonic Generals, but at the moment, he was nothing more than the leader of an assault squad. So what was he doing in a place like this?

Within the world of the demons, there was an extremely strong tendency to over-value skills related to fighting. Due to that, the number of individuals who acquired the Cooking skill were few and far between. For better or for worse, Viktor had come into possession of Cooking at a high rank thanks to his unique skill, Intemperate Feeding. One of the humans he had eaten the day before had been a chef from some famous restaurant. Although the rank of the skill had fallen a bit upon consumption, it still made Viktor the top cook in the country.

Well known for his serious and sincere personality, and in command of great respect from his peers, this opportunity saw Viktor instated as Sera's official caretaker. Although he had not even known that Gustav had a daughter prior to the appointment, under normal circumstances, it was a great honor to directly serve the royal family. However, the very first words that Gustav had said to him after giving him the position had frozen him to the core.

"If you lay a single hand on my daughter, be prepared for the consequences. Being flayed alive will seem like a mere massage in comparison. Understand?"

And that was how Viktor had started his new job, with Gustav's deadly serious eyes mere inches from his own...a beginning that did little to instill motivation, to say the least. However, he proved extremely proficient in his new role. His main duties included the management of everything related to his charge: education, tutoring, and combat training. Sera, who had a direct and curious personality, absorbed everything voraciously. Her remarkable talents soon blossomed, and she rarely caused Viktor any unnecessary trouble.

However, not everything was smooth sailing. This is the account of a certain incident that took place several months after Viktor became Sera's caretaker. It was morning, and he was in the middle of giving Sera her fighting lessons as usual.

"Hah!"

"Your fist was not wreathed in magic! And your starting motion is still too slow! You won't get far as a pugilist if you're relying solely on your Pugilism

skill!”

Having taken the punch thrown by Sera, Viktor barked out pointers for areas where she needed improvement. Every once in a while, he would have her fight against monsters that had been captured and brought in, but generally, the bulk of her training consisted of working on her fundamentals and sparring with Viktor in this way.

“But it’s hard to do! I don’t get how it feels to wrap my fist in magic!”

Viktor snickered. “Me being here would lose all meaning if you were capable of doing it from the start. There is no option but to patiently continue your training until the sensation becomes second nature to you. There is no need to rush; we demons have long lifespans. I will be here for you until you can do it.”

“Our lifespans...”

Viktor’s words were meant to grant Sera peace of mind, but for some reason, she fell silent, dropping her eyes to stare at the ground.

“What is the matter?”

“I...will I be living in this mansion for my entire life...?”

“Sera-sama...”

Since she had been born, Sera had never set foot outside of her home. The only people that she interacted with were her father, Gustav, and her mother, Eliza. There were also several demons tasked with taking care of things around the mansion, but none of them made for a good conversation partner for a girl Sera’s age. Aside from those people, there was pretty much only Viktor, her caretaker.

Gustav was keeping his daughter’s existence a highly classified secret. Although this was a measure born from Gustav’s efforts to thoroughly eliminate anything that might prove a threat to his daughter — and his country’s rocky relationship with its neighbors did give credence to his worries — he had yet to realize that everything he was doing was suffocating the very person he was trying to protect. Doting parents can be blinded by their emotions.

“Father has been coming every day lately, but now he has to go somewhere

far away for work, and won't be able to visit for a while."

"Does that make you feel lonely?"

"Mmm...nope! I have Mother here with me, so I'll be fine! Come on, let's continue training! Just watch, I'll master this in no time!"

Sera's tone was as bright as always, but Viktor could tell that she was merely putting up a front. Ten years old was an age where demons would feel driven to play and explore, to make friends, to share experiences with other people, and perhaps even to find a first love. Sera, however, was being denied all of those things. Back when Viktor had started and simply thought of his position as a mere job, it had not bothered him much. But now, it was a seed that had planted roots inside his heart, paining him more and more as it grew each day.

Is this what it feels like to be a parent?

He could serve as Sera's conversation partner, but he could not be a friend and interact with her as a peer. Their relationship as teacher and student prevented him from teaching her what she needed most right now. Despairing at his powerlessness, Viktor rolled his thoughts around in a corner of his mind, trying to think of anything at all that he could do for his charge.

"Sera-sama, is there anything specific that you want to eat for lunch?"

"Where did that come from?"

"Don't worry about it. Just tell me."

What could he do for her? He could satisfy her stomach with the Cooking skill that he had acquired by chance. That, and he could put in a word with Gustav to allow her a short excursion.

I'll probably have to resolve myself to getting punched, of course.

These were the only two ideas that had come to mind. In the future, such things would perhaps be left in the hands of the person — the demon — who could stand up to Gustav and with whom Sera would share reciprocated feelings. Although barebones, this plan of Viktor's was slowly taking shape inside his head.

Hm...entrusting Sera-sama to this as yet theoretical person is fine and all, but

it does make me feel slightly irritated. This is a new emotion that I'm feeling. How about I give this person a little test before Gustav-sama gets to him? Oh, yes, that is a good idea.

Much farther down the road, this idea would spur the construction of the Tower of Trials, the designing of which involved giving one floor to each of the Demonic Generals and situating Demon Lord Gustav at the very top, but that was a story for another day.

“Hmmm...oh, right!”

After appearing to be deep in thought for a short while, Sera suddenly jumped up and dashed out of the training grounds. It wasn't long before she returned with a book in her hand.

“This!”

“What...is this?”

“It's a dish called 'curry'! I want to eat this!”

The book that Sera held out to Viktor did indeed have the dish's name inscribed on its front cover, along with what seemed to be a drawing of its intended appearance. However, the volume was very aged, to the point where various parts of the pages within had simply faded away. Just as Viktor was about to say that he couldn't do it, he found Sera looking at him with eyes sparkling like precious jewels. He forced himself to swallow his intended words.

“S-Sure, I'll make it for you. Today's lunch shall be curry!”

“Really?! Yayyy!”

There was no backing out after that. Viktor pumped himself up more than he had ever done before, then set off for the “battlefield.” He drew upon all the cooking knowledge that he possessed, and ended up making *nikujaga* — basically, meat and potatoes without the curry sauce — instead. But Sera looked more than happy with it, so all's well that ends well.

Side Story 2: The Heroes of Deramis

Heroes existed in this world. Just like their portrayal in many RPGs, their appearances would coincide with the rising of a Demon Lord. In response to signs of a Demon Lord's impending arrival (such as monsters growing more ferocious), the Oracle of Deramis would receive a prophecy that would instruct her to summon otherworldly Heroes who could oppose the Demon Lord. This was the way in which peace and equilibrium were maintained. Roughly a year before Kelvin was transmigrated over, such a sequence of events had once again taken place within the most sacred part of Deramis. In the same manner as her predecessors, Colette, the Oracle of a new generation, was about to attempt the Hero-summoning Ritual in accordance with the prophecy that she had received from Goddess Melfina.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The Great Cathedral was enveloped in silence. Around Colette stood Cliff Strogav, captain of the Holy Order of Knights, and a few other devout knights that Cliff had deemed trustworthy, all of them stiff at attention and on high alert. The Pope was also present, despite being hidden from sight behind a huge curtain at the end of the hall. Before the curtain was a stone statue of an angel and a lion who seemed poised to protect the area behind them.

Amidst the softly falling moonlight, Colette repeatedly took deep breaths in an attempt to calm her nerves. It had been only a few days before that Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation and the very target of Colette's worship, had provided her with a prophecy. Colette had been praying to Melfina for as long as she could remember. Even after becoming the Oracle, she had continued to dedicate herself to proselytizing and spreading the sphere of influence of the Holy Order of Rinne. Everything she did, she did for Melfina's sake. If it was for the sake of her goddess, she would bear — nay, overcome! — any pain and suffering. There was perhaps even a slightly unhinged side of her that would have welcomed and enjoyed such tribulations.

As such, when Melfina finally descended, things almost spiraled out of control. Colette's emotions ran high and she fell into a state of almost complete shock from the sudden visit. However, the overwhelming drive to not allow her beloved goddess to see her truly embarrassing side proved just enough to pull her through the visitation. In a way, what Colette had managed could be lauded as quite a feat.

"Colette, have you calmed down yet?"

Coming from the other side of the curtain, the Pope's voice sounded not only gentle, but young. More specifically, the timbre of the voice sounded like that of a young boy in his mid-teens.

"Y-Yes, Your Holiness. Thank you for waiting for me."

"We want you to be calm enough to perform the Hero-summoning Ritual. If it helps, feel free to call me 'father.' Are you still feeling nervous?"

"A...bit, yes. But I'm fine now. I'm ready to start."

"Is that so? Then good luck. Out of curiosity, which kind of summoning are you planning on performing?"

"I'm thinking of summoning several people from another world. Reincarnation summoning always carries the risk of the subject being a bad person, whereas for transmigration summoning, Melfina-sama will do the choosing for us, which guarantees the personal character of the targets. Um...what do you think?"

"This is the answer that you have arrived at after thinking it through. Do what you feel is best. I will be supporting you from over here."

There had been no more visitations from Melfina since then, and Colette had only one chance at the ritual that would determine the fate of the entire world. Shoving her nerves down, she stepped forward to stand before the magic circle that she had personally drawn with painstaking care over the past few days. The tension in the air was so heavy that even the knights held their breaths.

"Melfina-sama, please lend me your strength!"

As if in response to her call, the magic circle began to glow faintly. An instant

later, the glow burst into a pillar of blinding light that reached all the way to the ceiling of the Great Cathedral.

Thud!

Something had fallen within the light of the magic circle.

“Ohhh, so this is the Oracle’s summoning magic!”

“What a divine sight! And look! Within the holy light are human silhouettes...”

Even while crying out in wonderment, the knights stepped forward protectively between the fading pillar of light and Colette. Their ability to discern what needed to be done, even before receiving explicit orders from a superior, indeed proved them worthy of being entrusted with the safety of the Oracle. However, Colette waved her hand to indicate that their concern was unneeded.

“These are the Heroes that Melfina-sama personally handpicked. Greeting them in such a manner would be akin to a declaration of our distrust. Stand down.”

“Then at least allow me to stand beside you. If it’s just me, I’m sure Melfina-sama, with her generous, benevolent nature, would forgive us that much.”

Before Colette could say anything, she found Cliff already at her side. She glanced over and, after a brief pause, murmured, “Do as you please.” Then she quickly turned back to the fading pillar of light.

Soon, the figures of four males and females could be seen. Although they looked dazed and puzzled, it was clear that all of them had very pleasant features. The clothes they were wearing all shared the same design, prompting Colette to deduce that they were affiliated with the same organization. Naturally, there was no way that anyone in this world, Colette included, could have known that they were school uniforms.

“U-Ughh...”

“Where are we...? Huh? Where’s the goddess from just now?”

“H-Hey, guys. Is everyone all right?”

“My body...is fine. But our situation...is maybe not fine.”

The silver-haired girl who had woken up first looked around and began to analyze the room. Before there were any misunderstandings, Colette stepped forward with her face in the saintly smile that she usually reserved for believers.

“Welcome to our Holy Empire of Deramis, oh great Heroes. I am Colette Deramilius, the Oracle of this country and the one responsible for summoning you. I pray for a long and harmonious relationship ahead of us. I understand that this might be a strange situation for you and that there is a lot to take in, but would you grant me the opportunity to provide a brief introduction first?”

“S-Saying that out of the blue —”

“Nana, hold on. The goddess in the dream told us about this, didn’t she? Let’s at least hear her out. Perhaps these people need our help for something.”

“W-Well, if Kanzaki-kun says so, then sure...”

“Agreed. Information is top priority.”

After the only male in the group, an adolescent with a stunningly handsome face who was supposedly named “Kanzaki,” voiced his willingness to listen, the other three also consented, albeit with differing reactions. In spite of the suddenness of the summoning, it appeared that Colette had managed to make a passable first impression. However, her true trial was only just beginning. Carefully choosing her words, she proceeded to explain the circumstances that her world was currently facing.



“Suddenly telling us about Heroes and the Demon Lord and whatnot...I mean, we were in our classroom only a short while ago.”

“Y-Yeah, I also can’t really relate. It feels to me like it’s all just a story...”

After hearing Colette’s account, the summoned Heroes looked only half convinced. Or to be more precise, their opinions were literally split in half. In response to Colette’s request for them to become Heroes and defeat the Demon Lord, the two who had just spoken, a petite girl with a sizable chest and a girl with her black hair up in a ponytail, seemed reluctant, whereas the guy who seemed like the group’s leader and the silver-haired girl who had first woken up were quite open to the idea.

“I want to try. Sounds like a game. Exciting.”

“Everyone, listen to me. I want to help these people, as well as everyone else in this world. I don’t know whether we truly have the power to do so, but if there is even the slightest chance that we do...we must try!”

“Mmm, I don’t know...”

“Ah, geez, look at you two going into another one of your spells again. Touya and Miyabi, calm down and think about this properly! We are *students*, all right?! And Nana, when you have an opinion, express it clearly!”

The girl with the ponytail was frowning fiercely while rebuking the other two. The familiarity with which she launched into admonishment seemed to hint at it being a rather frequent occurrence.

“Umm, in that respect, I think there is no cause for concern. Melfina-sama should have bestowed power befitting a Hero upon each of you. Despite being Level 1 at the moment, you should already be stronger than the average adventurer.”

Setsuna’s agitated words fell on deaf ears as Colette backed up the other camp. And indeed, her words seemed to have triggered something within the silver-haired girl.

“Wait, ‘adventurer’? And you just said ‘level’? Touya, only we can save this world. Saving people on the verge of despair is a given. A no-brainer. I’m so excited, I can’t help myself.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking! Setsuna, if it’s us, we’ll be able to pull it off! So let’s do it! This must be fate!”

“Kanzaki-kun! Somehow, I suddenly feel like I might be able to do it too!”

With that, the petite girl also joined the “let’s defeat the Demon Lord” side. As the only person left in what was now the minority, the ponytailed girl groaned and the frown on her face grew even deeper.

“It appears that your discussion has come to a conclusion. Once again...welcome to our world, oh great Heroes. All of Deramis will provide you with every bit of support that it can.”

Colette lifted the edges of her skirt and lowered her head in a graceful curtsy. The surrounding knights also drew their swords and pointed them upwards, with their perfectly synchronized movements leading to resonant crashes caused by their armor, which echoed throughout the hall. The sight was like something right out of a medieval movie.

“Oh geez, seriously, arrgh! After being shown something like that, now even I want to say yes.” She sighed. “I’m Shiga Setsuna. For what it’s worth, I’ve done kendo, which means I have some experience with a sword. But don’t expect too much from me.”

“I-I’m Nana...my name is Mizuoka Nana. I don’t really have anything that I’m particularly good at, but I’ll do my best!”

“Kuromiya Miyabi. If there’s magic, I want to learn it.”

“We officially accept your request, Colette-san. I’m Kanzaki Touya. You can just call me Touya. Let’s defeat this Demon Lord together!”

He extended a hand towards the Oracle.

“In that case, please feel free to call me Colette. We will be in your care, Tou —”

Just as Colette lifted her right hand to exchange a handshake —

“Eeek!”

“Aaah!”

Rustle.

Touya suddenly tripped, despite there having been nothing in his way on the perfectly smooth ground. Of course, when falling, it was a natural reaction to try to grab something, and Touya was no exception to this. However, his hand was stretched towards Colette at that very moment. With what was arguably god-like coincidence, Touya’s hand managed to grab the skirt of Colette’s outfit and pull it down. Right in front of everyone who had been fixated on the scene of what should have been a historic moment of the representative Hero shaking the hand of the Oracle. Even the highly trained knights were frozen in shock, unable to react to what had just happened.

“Ahh, right. Colette, we haven’t had the chance to mention this yet, but Touya...simply has that disposition. He might — no, he definitely will — accidentally do many more extremely impolite things to you in the future, and there’s honestly no alternative but to just get used to it.”

“Umm...I-looks like the underwear in this world is the same as in ours. Guess that’s one less worry,ahaha...”

“The Oracle wears black? Profound.”

“S-Sorry, Colette! It wasn’t on purpose!”

Setsuna’s and Nana’s words did not enter Colette’s ears at all. Her mind was currently completely frozen.

M-Melfina-sama, is this a trial? It surely must be.

As Colette’s brain slowly began kicking back into action, it directed all of its limited resources to processing her circumstances. Unfortunately, this day’s episode was but a mere preview of Touya’s lucky lecher accidents, and there were to be many more of them in the future. Of course, there was no way for Colette to know that at the moment. Those with sharp ears might have heard muffled giggling emanating from behind the curtain, but Colette did not hear this either.

Side Story 3: Colette's Tribulations

The day after being summoned as Heroes, Kanzaki Touya, Shiga Setsuna, Mizuoka Nana, and Kuromiya Miyabi immediately began their training under the guidance of Colette, the Oracle, and Cliff, the captain of the Holy Order of Knights.

"This is a dungeon?"

The petite Nana was looking up at a white tower that soared into the sky like a skyscraper. This tower, the Training Grounds of the Guardians, which seemed tall enough to reach the clouds, was a dungeon located on the grounds of the Palace of Deramis, and had been used in the training of Heroes for ages.

"If it's a dungeon, does that mean there are monsters and all inside? Are you sure it's safe to have it so close to the palace?"

"Please don't be concerned. The monsters that dwell within this dungeon mimic inorganic things like statues, and will not come out. In addition, they are passive by default, and will react only when killing intent is directed at them."

There was a worried expression on Setsuna's face, but in her hand was a sword that looked awfully similar to a Japanese katana. In spite of everything she had said, to a certain degree, it seemed like her initial reluctance had given way to a bit of motivation.

"Even so, that's one really tall tower. How many floors does it have?"

"It has a total of fifty floors. On the lower floors, only Level 1 monsters will come out, but that number increases as you go up, all the way to Level 30 at the top floors. Heroes, your aim is to reach the very top and defeat the boss who awaits you there!"

Colette gestured grandly to the summit of the tower. After having received another prophecy from Melfina, she was practically overflowing with desire to fulfill the task that she had been given.

"Dungeon! Monster! Let's go. We'll leave right now. Adventure awaits us!"

“Miyabi, hold on. The briefing is not over yet.”

Reacting quickly to Miyabi’s sudden dash for the dungeon, Cliff managed to grab the back of her collar before she got too far. Then he slowly dragged her back to where Colette and the others were gathered.

“Miyabi, we welcome your enthusiasm. But this is important information regarding what you’ll encounter, so you’ll want to hear it.”

“All right; make it quick, please.”

“Ahem. I shall continue. We will have the four of you enter as a party. Setsuna-san, do you remember the benefits of being in a party?”

“Party? Umm, it becomes possible to visibly see the HP and MP of party members. And it becomes possible to share XP gained from defeating monsters. Is that right?”

“Correct. I see that the party has already been set up. Do you all see blue and green bars above each other’s heads? Green is HP and blue is MP.”

The Heroes looked at each other, then nodded in acknowledgment.

“If you feel that the bars are blocking your view, you simply have to will them away. Personally, I prefer them to be hidden. Our telepathic connection lets me know everyone’s statuses anyway.”

“Telepathic connection?”

“Oh, sorry, I was talking to myself. Don’t mind that. Ahem, so, zero HP means death, so be very careful to never let that happen. MP falling to zero does not lead to death, but could make you feel very sick or sap all your strength. Symptoms do vary from person to person.”

“S-So we can actually die...”

“How about revival magic? Like in computer games.”

“C-Campewtergeims...? I’m afraid I do not know what that is, but what I do know is that even Rank S White Magic cannot bring back someone who has died. All of you are special individuals who have been hand-picked by Melfina-sama, the Goddess of Reincarnation. I beseech you to always value your own lives above all else.”

Colette peered worriedly at each of the Heroes' faces. If any of them were to die before defeating the Demon Lord, she would be unable to summon any more Heroes. In her eyes — no, in the eyes of the world — these four were irreplaceable beacons of hope on whose shoulders the fate of the entire world now rested.

“No problem! Everyone, do your best to avoid any dangerous situations. Let's do this carefully!”

“If you ask me, you're the one most likely to jump into trouble, Touya...”

“His name as a troublemaker is deserved.”

“Guys, Kanzaki-kun can't just ignore people in trouble, so it can't be helped.”

“As long as you all remain careful...” With yesterday's incident still fresh in her mind, Colette could not help but feel slightly concerned. “Oh, and I'd like to offer a clarification regarding the experience-sharing I mentioned earlier. The person who deals the final blow actually gets the bulk of the XP, after which the remaining XP is distributed among the other party members based on how much they contributed to the fight.”

“So we're going to have to be mindful about who to give the finishing blow to, then.”

“Touya and Setsuna use swords, but Nana and I will be in the back. Might be tough.”

“Oh, that's right. Which means Miyabi-chan and I will also have to get hits in.”

The classes that Miyabi and Nana had chosen were Mage and Tamer, respectively. Miyabi was feeling uneasy about her max MP at Level 1, whereas Nana had yet to Tame a single monster. Compared to Touya and Setsuna, whose main fighting styles were going to be close-quarters combat, delivering the final blow seemed like a much taller order for the pair in the back.

“There is no need to overstretch yourselves to clinch the final blow when you are at such a low level. If I had to guess, the default minimum shared XP should be able to carry you to Level 5 with ease. By then, you'll have earned enough skill points to acquire a method of attack or two.”

“All right, so Touya and I will handle things for the most part until you two get to Level 5.”

“Leave it all to us!”

“Oh...”

The sight of Touya grinning with his sparkly white teeth and reliable-looking thumbs-up caused Nana to gasp with infatuation. To her eyes, there even seemed to be a backlight outlining his silhouette.

Cliff coughed apologetically, interrupting what appeared to be the beginning of a scene out of a YA novel. “I’m really sorry to say this when you guys are all fired up, but the Oracle and I will be doing most of the fighting. All you need to do is take turns dealing the final blow.”

“What? Colette and Captain Cliff are coming along?”

“Of course we are!” Colette cut in. “Although you are all Heroes, you are still Level 1. Having been entrusted with your fates by Melfina-sama herself, we will do everything in our power to ensure your protection!”

Saddled with such an important responsibility by Goddess Melfina, Colette was as overprotective as she could be.

“Captain Cliff I understand, but can you really fight, Colette? For us to be protected by a frail and dainty girl —”

“Come on out, Mystic Cougar.”

Cutting Touya off, Colette called out the name of one of her Followers. A magic circle appeared on the ground, and from within the bright white light that it emitted, a mountain lion emerged, roaring at the top of its lungs. By the time the light had faded away, Touya and the rest found themselves face to face with a stone statue in the shape of a cougar, which seemed to be sizing them up.

“Auugh!”

The abrupt appearance of the big cat right beside him caused Touya to fall onto his butt in surprise. Colette gracefully mounted the back of the creature in side saddle fashion, the edges of her mouth lifted in a faint smile of pride.

“My class is Summoner, and this lion is one of my Followers. We will be

working together to help with your leveling. Please rest assured, even an average Rank A monster will not be able to beat us!”

“Uh...wouldn’t it be faster to just send Colette to go defeat the Demon Lord?”

“Unfortunately, neither Cliff nor I are powerful enough to do that. There is also another reason, which we’ll get into later on. What we should be focusing on right now is getting all of you leveled up!”

“The Oracle is correct. Let’s get started.”

Cliff and Colette headed briskly for the dungeon. The four Heroes exchanged looks, then broke into a trot behind them.



“Oh man, I’m so tired.”

“Me too.”

After their first day of dungeon crawling and leveling, the Heroes had returned to the Palace of Deramis. Upon arrival, the two girls who had been in humanities clubs and the guy from the go-home club promptly sank into the super soft sofas.

“Nana and Miyabi, you’re too out of shape. If you had been doing just a little bit of exercise regularly, this wouldn’t have tired you out so much!”

“Please don’t compare us to you, seeing as you make it to the kendo national tournament every year, Setsuna-chan.”

“Studying, I might have a chance. But physical tests, spare me, please.”

“Oh come on, you two, don’t start grumbling so early on.”

“Don’t be so hard on them, Setsuna. Even I’m completely spent.”

Touya, who looked like he could not even muster the strength to stand, spoke up in support of the two girls. Clearly, all of them besides Setsuna were thoroughly exhausted. As Setsuna finally took a seat, accepting the fact that there was nothing else to be done at the moment, Colette entered the room, bearing a tray loaded with a teapot and cups filled with black tea.

“Everyone, thank you for working so hard today. There is still some time

before dinner. Please feel free to rest up until then.”

“Nice, thanks.”

Nana accepted a cup, then took a deep whiff of the sweet, full fragrance of the tea.

“Thanks to our efforts today, Touya and Setsuna are now both Level 7, and Nana and Miyabi are now Level 5. As for the dungeon itself, you have reached the sixth floor. All in all, a rather strong start, I’d say.”

“Well, yeah, but that was only because you and Captain Cliff brought all the monsters to a near-death state before letting us close. Are you sure that’s the best way to do it?”

“Pfft, there is still time before the Demon Lord’s resurrection, so there is no need to rush. Someday, we might indeed arrange opportunities for the four of you to fight by yourselves so that you can gain some confidence. But that will only be after some serious sword lessons with Cliff.”

“Good luck, you two!” Miyabi’s uncharacteristically lively encouragement for something that clearly wouldn’t be her problem caused Nana to smile wryly.

“Miyabi and Nana, you two will be having magic lessons with me in the meantime.”

Amidst the slightly awkward silence that followed, Touya spoke up as if suddenly having remembered something. “Oh, by the way, the goddess in our dream gave us all some...‘Unique Skills,’ I think she called them? Should we try using those in battle?”

“Umm, I did ask Captain Cliff about it, but we were pretty occupied with just getting through the dungeon today...and my Animal Communication skill is pretty much what it sounds like, so I’m not sure if it’s effective on stone statue monsters or not.”

“It has ‘Animal’ in the name, so...doubtful. Still, could try tomorrow.”

“Guess I should. If we could only encounter a cute monster, then I’d have nothing to complain about!”

Nana clenched her fists to express her motivation. The Taming skill that she

possessed enabled her to domesticate monsters. However, her low rank afforded her limited slots, so she was rather determined to find a cute, fluffy one to Tame. Unfortunately for her, they would only be challenging inorganic monsters within this dungeon.

“Touya’s Unique Skill is especially powerful. Serge Flore-sama, the Hero who defeated the previous Demon Lord, also possessed this skill.”

“Really? For what it’s worth, I’ve read the skill description, but I don’t really feel like it’s changed anything for me.”

“Ahaha, with Kanzaki-kun normally being the way he is...”

“Umm, well, Touya’s special disposition aside, this is a skill that could make you almost invincible, depending on the circumstances. Being able to use it properly in battle means something very different from the norm, though, so please train without relying on it for now. In terms of direct usage in battle, Setsuna’s Iron Cutting Authority is extremely powerful. I suppose the only drawback would be its high MP cost.”

“I know, right? It practically empties my MP with even minimal use, so I’m going to have to be really careful about when I use it.”

Setsuna’s katana made a soft clink as she drew it slightly. The well-polished blade reflected her face.

“Setsuna-chan, you’ve already tried using your Unique Skill?”

“I tested it beforehand. It’s always best to try out things like this ahead of time whenever possible.”

“I saw it. Setsuna was, like, ‘Iron Cutting Authority!’ and —”

“Miyabi, please don’t reenact it! Now that I’m thinking about it with a cool head, why did I say the skill name out loud? Oh my gosh, so embarrassing...”

Although her face was expressionless the entire time, Miyabi somehow looked very lively as she pretended to be Setsuna swinging her sword. Setsuna, on the other hand, was as red as a tomato.



A week after their training began, the Heroes of Deramis were still making

good progress through the Training Grounds of the Guardians, under the close guidance of Colette and Cliff.

One evening, Colette was sitting in the exclusive bath of the Palace of Deramis, once again praying to Goddess Melfina. True to her identity as the Oracle, she would refocus herself by praying whenever she had spare time. The fact that she had been doing this from a young age was part of why she continued the practice, but more than anything else, it was her almost unnatural religious piety that drove her to do so.

“Melfina-sama...”

Splash.

The sound of a single drop of water echoed through the room. Illuminated solely by moonlight and adorned by Colette’s pure and innocent figure, the bath, located on one of the upper floors of the palace, seemed to be wrapped in a mysterious and fantastical aura. A beautiful girl and a beautiful background being all that are necessary for a beautiful piece of art has always been an immutable law of nature.

“Melfina-sama, please rest assured that I will dedicate all I have to nurturing the Heroes into fine —”

“Hm-hm-hmm! Man, am I tired. For some reason, I couldn’t fall asleep, so might as well take a dip to rest up before tomo—”

“.....”

“.....”

Abruptly, Touya (who had nonchalantly strolled into the bath while wearing absolutely nothing) and Colette found themselves staring at each other. As one’s face turned bright red, the other grew pale. In the romantic comedy manga sense, an extraordinarily lucky man accidentally walking in on a beautiful girl in the middle of her bath was another immutable law of nature.

“?!?!?!?”

“Ah, um, I’m sorry! It wasn’t on purpose!”

After yet another lucky lecher occurrence, Touya dashed off like the wind.

Colette did not even have time to scream.

“Oh, Melfina-sama...this past week, my underwear has been seen five times, and counting what just happened, my naked self has been seen four times. Thanks to Cliff’s quick reflexes, we’ve managed to avoid any direct contact as of yet, but...is this truly a trial like I originally thought? Of course, if it is your wish, I would gladly offer up this body of mine. So may this humble servant hear your divine voice once again...”

It was not clear whether it was resignation or supplication in that prayer, but it would be another year before Colette would get to hear Melfina’s voice again. The Oracle’s tribulations were still only at the very beginning of the prelude. With strong mental fortitude, today, too, she would continue doing her very best.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing *Black Summoner 1: The Bound Demon*. I am Doufu Mayoi. For those who are reading my work for the first time, it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance. For those who have picked up this book from a shelf after picking it up as a web novel, I express heartfelt gratitude for your continued support.

Well, well, well, this book has finally gotten published. This is the official publication of the series of the same name on the web novel site Syosetsuka ni Narou. It was from October to December of 2014 when I wrote the web novel chapters that would become this book. Time truly flies, doesn't it? When I first joined the site in 2013, I was nothing more than a passionate reader, not even dreaming that I myself would one day take up my own pen. What prompted me to start was...what was it? To be honest, I don't really remember anything specific. One day, I just suddenly came to realize that writing had already become another hobby of mine. That's right, it was just a hobby at the start. To think that my work would now actually hit shelves? I doubted the wisdom of this decision many, many times. Overlap, are you sure about this? I guess crazy things really do happen in this world.

Although the series is now titled *Black Summoner* (Kuro no Shoukanshi), it was actually *Summoner of All Time and Place* (Kokontouzai Shoukanshi) at the start. I had chosen that title while hoping to write about a Summoner protagonist who would be going on adventures to all sorts of places, perhaps even to the past and future. Sadly, though, that title was not well received, to say the least. Many readers at the time left feedback along the lines of "the title detracts from the work." So I tried changing it, and what do you know? The next day — or was it the day after? — the name *Black Summoner* made it into the rankings of Syosetsuka ni Narou. This was when I had been writing for around half a year. I thought to myself, "Are these guys in their right minds?" many times. Guess I'm a doubtful person by nature. However, I slept on it, woke up, and discovered that it wasn't just a dream. To my delight, it was real.

This Volume 1 perfectly covers all of *Arc 1: Adventurer* of the web novel. However, as of this moment, the web novel is plunging full steam ahead into Arc 7 already. That's quite a gap, not to mention the latter half of Arc 7 is actually rather long. How did I even manage to write that much? In any case, I'll be handling the novelization while continuing to upload web novel chapters going forward, doing my best not to let either one fall behind. I promise I'll work just hard enough not to die! That's as far as I'm willing to compromise!

Well, I also worked hard enough (without dying) on Volume 1, and thanks to that, I've finally gotten to see the day where I could enjoy the lively figures of the main party of Kelvin, Clotho, Gerard, Efil, and Sera. I don't think I would have any regrets if I were to die now. Kelvin has an even more evil smile than I had imagined, Clotho is so jiggly, Gerard looks far too cool for a grandpa, and Efil and Sera are both super cute! I absolutely love how everyone is depicted! I can't ever fully express how thankful I am to the illustrator, Kurogin-sama. I am but a mere author who wears his greed on his sleeve, but if possible, I would love to also see the faces of the other party members who have yet to make their appearances. To make this happen, I, too, will do my best to polish up a book worthy of such an honor.

This will not be a surprise to those who've already finished reading the book, but it is a work with a lot of really long depictions of battles. This is largely just the author (me) letting his fantasies run wild, but as the protagonist is a battle junkie, I guess it can't be helped, right? "I'm not in the wrong at all" is what I'd like to say, but nah, that was a joke. It was all my doing. To be honest, I had started off with every intention of writing an orthodox otherworld transmigration story, but as I went along, I started to have doubts about what "orthodox" really meant. Well, I'm not all that bright, and there isn't much point in a dumb person overthinking things, so I decided to just write what I wanted to write. As a result, the battles got really long. Yeah, there's really no helping it. I mean, I don't have the confidence to boldly declare, "This is *my* orthodox!", but as long as readers enjoy my work, that's enough for me. To those who even go so far as to read an Afterword like this, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Lastly, I want to say one final word of thanks to Kurogin-sama for the amazing

illustrations, to Sugimoto-sama for designing the book, to the proofreaders, and last but certainly not least, to all the wonderful readers.

While praying that I'll have the honor of seeing another volume go out, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / HUMAN /
SUMMONER
■ LEVEL: 74
■ TITLE: DEMON-KILLING CHAMPION
■ HP: 762/762
■ MP: 2,280/2,280 (+760)
SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP - 100
SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP - 300
SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP - 180
SUMMONING MELFINA: MAX MP - ?

■ STRENGTH: 147
■ ENDURANCE: 310 (+160)
■ AGILITY: 456
■ MAGIC: 953 (+160)
■ LUCK: 602

■ EQUIPMENT

STAFF OF THE EVIL SAGE TREE (RANK A)
MITHRIL DAGGER (RANK C)
SAGE'S BLACK ROBE (RANK B)
BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK D)

■ SKILLS

SUMMONING (RANK S) [AVAILABLE SLOTS: 6]
GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)
WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)
ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)
PRESENCE SENSING (RANK B)
DANGER DETECTION (RANK B)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)
NERVES OF STEEL (RANK B)
ARMY COMMAND (RANK B)
SMITHING (RANK S)
SPIRIT (RANK B)
IRON WALL (RANK B)
MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS
EXPERIENCE SHARING
■ PASSIVE EFFECTS
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ EFIL

■ 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HALF-ELF / BATTLE MAID

■ LEVEL: 71

■ TITLE: PERFECT MAID

■ HP: 576/576

■ MP: 1,065/1,065

■ STRENGTH: 291

■ ENDURANCE: 289

■ AGILITY: 753 (+160)

■ MAGIC: 739 (+160)

■ LUCK: 143

■ EQUIPMENT

SOLAR BOW (RANK C)

BATTLE MAID UNIFORM III (RANK B)

MAID HEADDRESS (RANK D)

SLAVE COLLAR (RANK D)

LEATHER BOOTS (RANK D)

■ SKILLS

ARCHERY (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK A)

ARSIGHT (RANK B)

COVERT ACTION (RANK A)

SERVICE (RANK B)

COOKING (RANK A)

SEWING (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK B)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE FLAME DRAGON KING

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ CLOTHO

■ 0 Y/O / GENDERLESS / SLIME GLUTTONIA

■ LEVEL: 73

■ TITLE: DEVOURER

■ HP: 1,247 / 1,247 (+100)

■ MP: 848 / 848 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 634 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 738 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 659 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 576 (+100)

■ LUCK: 510 (+100)



■ EQUIPMENT

NONE

■ SKILLS

GLUTTONY (UNIQUE SKILL)

METALICIZE (RANK A)

ABSORPTION (RANK A)

DIVISION (RANK A)

DISMANTLE (RANK A)

STORAGE (RANK S)

BLUNT DAMAGE RESISTANCE

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING / MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ GERARD

■ 138 Y/O / MALE / HADES KNIGHT CAPTAIN / DARK KNIGHT

■ LEVEL: 80

■ TITLE: PATRIOTIC GUARDIAN

■ HP: 2,130/2,130 (+580) (+100)

■ MP: 411/411 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,044 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,109 (+320) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 373 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 277 (+100)

■ LUCK: 290 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

DREADNOUGHT (RANK A)

CRIMSON MANTLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

LOYALTY (UNIQUE SKILL)

SELF MODIFICATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK B)

MIND'S EYE (RANK A)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK B)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

TEACHING (RANK B)

FORTITUDE (RANK C)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

IRON WALL (RANK A)

MATERIALIZATION

DARK DAMAGE RESISTANCE

SLICING DAMAGE RESISTANCE

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SELF MODIFICATION/DREADNOUGHT

SELF MODIFICATION/CRIMSON MANTLE

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SERA

■ 21 Y/O / FEMALE / ARCHDEMON / CURSED PUGILIST

■ LEVEL: 75

■ TITLE: DEMON LORD'S DAUGHTER

■ HP: 970/970 (+100)

■ MP: 994/994 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 580 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 466 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 573 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 569 (+100)

■ LUCK: 529 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

TAILOR-MADE OUTFIT (RANK C)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

BLOOD DOMINION (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK A)

FLIGHT (RANK C)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK B)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK B)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK C)

DANCING (RANK B)

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK B)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



Bonus Short Stories

A Rumor Among the Adventurers

One evening inside a certain tavern in Parth, several adventurers were enjoying a few pints after having returned from their respective quests. The customers present were a gathering mainly composed of those in Rank E (beginners) and Rank D (so-so experienced).

A somewhat dirty man wearing leather armor turned to start a conversation with a man who was sharing his table. “Hey, have you heard the rumor about some crazy monster showing up in the Ancient Castle of Evil Spirits?”

The other man took a sip of his ale. “Ahh, that topic again?” he replied listlessly. “Why’re you bringing it up now? That rumor’s already been around for a while, hasn’t it?”

“Oh, so you’ve already heard it,” sighed the leather-armored guy, dropping his shoulders. Apparently, he had thought the topic would make for an interesting conversation starter.

“You’re talking about the Black Spirit Knight, right? The one that several people had set off to subjugate but never came back from?”

“Yes, yes, that one. Almost all of the adventurers who tried it were Rank D. The Black Spirit Knight itself is also supposed to be Rank D. So isn’t it weird that no one’s succeeded so far?”

“Well...what if it’s the dungeon boss or something? It’s been quite a while since Uld took down the previous one, hasn’t it?”

“Maybe. But it’s hard to draw any conclusions when none of the witnesses have made it back alive. Should I try to go and take a peek at it, you think?”

Suddenly, a cheery guy with a mug of ale in hand turned around from his seat at the bar to join in on the conversation. “Oh, you guys talking about the Ancient Castle of Evil Spirits? I heard that someone’s finally made it back to the

guild today.”

“Whoa, you serious?”

“Totally serious. Though, well, I only heard it from my party members. Supposedly it was a party of three, two of whom made it back alive. Just as you guys guessed, the report confirmed that the Black Spirit Knight was located in the deepest room in the dungeon. It’s probably a mutant species.”

The two adventurers who had been merely enjoying the gossip looked surprised by their random guess actually proving to be true. They had been close to actually making the trip themselves.

“Man, then doesn’t it mean the monster’s Rank C or B? I ain’t getting involved with it, no sirree.”

“But listen to this. For some strange reason, that mutated Black Spirit Knight supposedly doesn’t attack you unless you attack it first.”

“What? How can that be?”

“Hell if I know. What if it has intelligence?”

“Now *that’s* unlikely. There’s no way such a high tier would show up this close to Parth!”

“Hahaha, I know, right? If anything, the survivors were probably so nervous they read the situation wrong or remembered wrong.”

“Hey, who can say...oh, right!” shouted the man at the counter, looking like he’d just remembered something. “Which reminds me, I also heard something else. Just before the survivors arrived, a few adventurers headed off after having accepted the subjugation quest.”

“Talk about bad timing! So, who are the unlucky bastards?”

“It was apparently a newcomer who’d just been promoted to Rank E, together with Cashel and his party.”

The moment Cashel’s name came up, an unpleasant look came over the other two adventurers’ faces.

“Of all people, it had to be Cashel? That newcomer’s not coming back, that’s

for sure.”

“Cashel might be able to actually defeat the Black Spirit Knight, but that guy’s got a ton of dark rumors surrounding him, after all.”

“He isn’t called the ‘Newcomer Crusher’ for nothing. Not that anyone would ever say it to his face, though. In terms of raw strength, he’s probably stronger than Uld, isn’t he?”

As of late, there had been many cases of newcomers accompanying Cashel on quests and never making it back. They were all reported as having fallen to surprise attacks by monsters or unexpected accidents inside dungeons, but the number of incidents was far too great to be a coincidence. Those in Cashel’s party were also of unknown origins. Almost all adventurers in Parth did their best to avoid the whole group.

“But...thing is, the newcomer this time is a cut above the rest. He’s been soloing his way this entire time, but almost all the quests he’s taken have been one rank up. He’s pulled ten consecutive Quest Clears, coming back each time without even a scratch. I’ve heard whispers about how he’s caught the guildmaster’s eye too.”

“By ‘one rank up,’ you’re talking about Rank E, right? Unlike Rank F, Rank E quests mean dealing with enemies that come in groups...wait, he solos them *and* comes back without a scratch?! Are you sure he’s Rank F?!”

“What if he ends up defeating both Cashel *and* the Black Spirit Knight?”

“Hahaha! Even he wouldn’t be able to pull that off! Or would he...?”

The adventurers gulped their drinks down.

“Ah, you guys talking about the newcomer? I saw him earlier getting real chummy with Ange-chan from reception!”

“What?! You serious?!”

“Ugh, I-let go of my neck, dude!”

“Goddammit! And I was such a fan of Ange-chan...”

“Is that so...well hey, it’s not like they’re going out or anything yet.”

“Ange-chaaaaaaan!!!”

The adventurers’ lively conversation based on rumor and conjecture continued deep into the night. In the not-so-distant future, yet another rumor would be born, becoming the newest hot topic around the tavern-going adventurers, but that’s a story for another day.

Gerard’s Journal

It is now several weeks since my king purchased a slave, a young elven girl by the name of Efil. When they first met, she was still weak and frail, but her growth since then has been nothing short of remarkable. Below is the log that I’ve created to keep track of her growth out of the familial love that I’ve developed for this girl, who is the perfect age to be my granddaughter.

2nd day after Efil’s purchase

Although she was cleaned up and given a maid uniform to wear, her body was still too weak and frail to do any manual labor. There really was no solution for this aside from continuing to eat Clare’s well-balanced meals and slowly building her body back up.

Today, we went out to buy clothes for Efil. She is apparently planning on relying on her own skills to make what she really wants to wear in the future, so what we picked out today is only meant to tide her over until then.

“Master, p-please wait for me...”

No matter where they went, Efil always stayed behind my king like a little puppy. When he noticed it, my king took her hand, which caused her to abruptly turn all red in a truly innocent display. Seeing youngsters enjoying their youth really does bring me back. I could watch them all day.

3rd day

My king visited the Adventurer’s Guild together with Efil. As discussed beforehand, she would be registering there as an adventurer. This might sound a bit weird coming from my mouth, but it was after completing my subjugation

quest that my king had been seen in a new light by everyone around. And why wouldn't he? A Rank-B adventurer is, for all intents and purposes, now the top adventurer in Parth. The concubine candidate who mans the reception at the guild said so.

Before long, the registration finished without mishap. However, the receptionist did look extremely surprised when she first saw Efil standing next to my king. Are the two of them going to be fighting over him? It should be interesting to watch!

After registration, my king brought Efil to the practice grounds within the guild in order to test out her skill with the bow.

"Aim for the center of that target. You think you can do it?"

"I'm not sure but I'll give it a try."

Efil looked extremely nervous. Word about my king partying up with a promising newcomer had spread through the guild like wildfire, drawing the attention of many adventurers. I was very worried for her...

"I did it! I did it, Master!!"

Well, I was worried for her until she hit the bull's-eye in not only one, but every single one of the targets. As her ears twitched incessantly in reaction to my king patting her head as a reward, the other adventurers buzzed with astonishment.

Haha, surprised, are you? That's just how talented our Efil is! Just like my king, I had believed in her from the very start!

5th day

Today, Efil gathered all her courage to lower her head. To whom, you ask? To Clare, the proprietress of the inn where my king and Efil are staying. She wanted to make my king's meals with her own hands. Up until now, she's been watching Clare cook from afar, which has clearly given her ideas. What an admirable girl she is.

As for Clare's reaction...well, her eyes went wide when she heard Efil's

request, probably taken by surprise by how resolute she sounded. However, she readily and happily gave her consent, and even went as far as to offer to teach her how to cook. This Clare is a really great woman after all. What, me? My wife will forever be the only one for me.

14th day

With Efil having gotten used to subjugation quests, we went after bigger game today. Our target this time was the Armored Tiger. According to my king, this was a special quest personally assigned to him by the guildmaster.

“The formation will be as usual: Gerard and Clotho in front, Efil and me as support. This time, we’ll have Efil try out the new move that she has just come up with. So Efil, you activate Covert Action and remain on standby. Feel free to take your shot once you see an opening.”

“Yes, Master. I will be sure to make it count.”

As of late, Efil has grown reliable both as a battle comrade and as a maid. When I remember how she was at the start, it does make me feel a bit lonely, but this is what happens when they grow. I suppose I should just be happy about it.

And, well, it seems like she and my king get quite sweet with each other when they’re alone together. My king goes to the trouble of deactivating the Network, so it’s really obvious. Even I wouldn’t be so coarse as to peek or anything, so I would hope they’d be more trusting of me.

Oh right, speaking of which, I *coincidentally* saw my king and Efil under a tree — wait, my king, how long have you been there?! No, wait, don’t read it! That’s my secret —

Sera’s Hangover

“Ughh, my head is pounding...what is this...” I groaned as I woke up with a headache that seemed to be buried deep inside my skull. “What...was I doing yesterday?”

My body felt extremely sluggish. On top of that, my memory was blurry, and

for some reason, I was sleeping in an unfamiliar bed. I thought I faintly remembered someone carrying me, but I couldn't say for sure.

In any case, I didn't want to move. At times like these, going back to sleep was best.

Just as I burrowed back under my sheets, however, there was a knock at my door.

"Sera, it's already noon. Isn't it about time to get up?"

The voice belonged to Kelvin, the person who had rescued me from darkness just the day before. He was the first humanoid male that I'd ever met aside from Father, but he did not seem as barbaric as I'd expected, what with Father telling me that "all males are wolves."

"May I come in?"

"Uh...sure."

"All right, excuse me. Ahhh, looks like you have a hangover."

"Hangover?"

If I remembered correctly, "hangover" was the unique illness caused by drinking too much alcohol, the one that I always saw Father suffering from? He told me never to drink, but...oh.

"I...drank alcohol and collapsed?"

"So you remember. Sorry, I rashly offered you some."

"Nah, I only guessed it. Father was like that."

Father also got drunk extremely easily, despite loving to drink. I nostalgically recalled the sight of the Four Demonic Generals frantically trying to deal with him.

"Oh, are demons generally weak to alcohol? I didn't expect that."

"Mmm...I don't know about other demons, but from among my parents and the Four Demonic Generals, only Father was like that. Mother was actually quite strong, if anything."

"So you take after your father, then. In any case, please don't ever drink

alcohol again.”

“Huh? Um, sure?”

Kelvin looked deadly serious while lowering his head to me. I’d seen this before. This was how Viktor looked when he tried to suggest something to Father on behalf of the other retainers. Did I do something to Kelvin yesterday?

“Thank you. If *that* was to happen again and again, I’m not sure my body could take it...”

“What?”

“Ah, nothing, I was just talking to myself. More importantly, how are you feeling?”

“My head hurts and I feel like throwing up. To be honest, it’s the worst.”

I didn’t remember any of it, but I had a feeling that I’d had a ton of fun during the drinking. If I was going to have to suffer this every time I drank, though, I should probably take Kelvin’s advice and not do it again. Ohhh, so Kelvin said what he said because he was worried about me.

“In that case, lie back down. I’ll heal you now.”

“Heal me? So...like this?”

As requested, I lay down on my back. Kelvin placed the palm of his hand on my forehead. It felt cool and nice. When I closed my eyes, he chanted something. Strangely, my mood grew calm and —

“Hmm? I don’t feel sick anymore. And my headache’s gone too.”

“I alleviated your symptoms with White Magic. Come on, breakf— Well, it’s lunch now, I guess. Anyway, Efil’s prepped everything already, so let’s go down and eat.”

“Okay...”

“Your face still looks a bit red. You okay?”

“I...I’m fine! Really!”

I’d just remembered that Kelvin was the first boy around my age that I’d ever spoken to. Yesterday, I was hardly in a state to think about it, but properly

realizing that now made me rather embarrassed. I didn't dislike it, though...I don't think.

"You sure? Don't push yourself, all right?"

"I'm totally fine! Come on, let's get going!"

I grabbed Kelvin's hand and rushed down to the ground floor, where the meal was waiting. I wasn't sure exactly what I was feeling yet, but it wasn't like me to worry about it. I could worry any time I wanted. Viktor told me to go see the outside world. So for now, I'm going to simply enjoy it as much as I can!

Efil's Morning

Just like every other morning, I woke up as the sun was about to rise. As soon as I opened my eyes, right before me was the face of my Master, the person who I loved with every fiber of my being. I was reminded yet again how blessed I was. The me from a mere month ago would not have been able to even dream of such circumstances.

"Good morning, Master."

We had gone to sleep quite late last night. And so, to avoid waking Master up, I greeted him in a soft whisper. I wanted very much to continue gazing at his sleeping face, but I had to prepare breakfast. I pulled myself together, then changed into my maid uniform and descended to the inn's kitchen.

"Good morning, Clare-san."

"You just got up as well, Efil-chan? Good morning to you too."

Upon entering the kitchen, I found Clare-san already having started preparations for the guests' breakfasts. In spite of the bother, she was so generous that she allowed me to use the space to make breakfast for Master and the rest of my party. I'd only had to ask once, and she had immediately agreed on the spot, even going as far as to teach me how to cook. I owed her so much that I didn't think I could ever fully repay her. As a token way of expressing my gratitude, I always tried to help out at the tavern whenever I could. *I hope my small contribution is useful to her in some way.*

“Mm, looks like I’m a bit early.”

“Good morning, Gerard-san.”

“Sorry, customer. We’re still in the middle of prepping.”

As Clare-san and I continued busying ourselves, Gerard-san had come down from his room. Having become capable of materializing his body just the other day, he had started staying in a room of his own at the Fairy’s Song, and it was decided that he would be eating breakfast with us going forward. He had a bigger appetite than Master, so I was making a larger portion for him.

“Not a problem. I’ll be heading out for my daily morning walk.”

“Um...are you not going to take your armor off?”

Even though he had materialized himself, Gerard-san remained adamant about keeping his armor on. In all likelihood, he probably slept in it. *Does he not find it suffocating?*

“For me, this is my natural state. Efil, never, ever try to peek at my body, all right?”

“O-Of course. I won’t.”

The usually easygoing Gerard-san pressed home his warning with what I thought was a serious face. *Gerard-san, exactly what secret is your body hiding —*

“If anyone ever sees me, I’ll die of embarrassment! Oh my gosh, you’re such a perv!”

Or so I’d thought, but turned out it was the usual Gerard-san after all. Clare-san was looking up at the wall, seemingly holding in her laughter. Although his explanation was roundabout, apparently Gerard-san was simply embarrassed. After saying what he wanted to say, he briskly set off for his walk. *What a carefree person he really is.*

“Efil, good morningggg.”

“Good morning, Sera-san.”

Several minutes after Gerard-san had left, it was Sera-san’s turn to wake up.

Yesterday, she had slept until noon because she was suffering from a hangover, but today, she was up very early.

“I’m still not in top form. Because I was asleep for so long, now my body won’t move like I tell it to. You know what I mean?”

Sera-san was our latest comrade, having become Master’s Follower only two days ago. I was still unfamiliar with her preferences for food and her daily rhythm, so I was going to have to confirm it all as soon as possible. After all, ensuring that everybody enjoyed their days in comfort was one of the fundamentals of being a maid.

“Sera-san, is there anything particular that you want to eat?”

“I can eat anything and I like everything! I grew up being taught by my father that it wasn’t good to be picky about food. I make sure to chew properly before swallowing too!”

Sera-san is a wonderful person. Now, where’s my memo? That aside, looks like she’s in a great mood today. Did something good happen? It seemed to me that she was looking even brighter than she did yesterday.

“Efil-chan, isn’t it about time?”

Clare-san’s reminder came with perfect timing. *Oh no, this won’t do. It is almost time to wake Master up.* I rushed to set out everybody’s breakfast at our usual table and turned to head back up to our room.

“Huh? What’s going on?”

“I have to wake Master up. I must not be late by even a second.”

“Wake Kelvin? I’ll come too!”

After being woken up with a powerful knock to his head, Master proceeded to punish Sera-san by taking away her breakfast. Although this was a common sight, I had a feeling that today, too, was going to be full of surprises and excitement.

Veteran Adventurer in Sangria Forest

Several days after Kelvin and his party took down the demon, four men with very muscular builds were gathered in front of the forest ruled by perpetual darkness, a place that no one who knew its identity would ever willingly approach.

“We’ve finally arrived, Leader. This is the dungeon known as the most difficult in Parth’s vicinity, Sangria Forest!”

“Damn, I’m getting nervous.”

“Get it together, you guys! We came here with the intention of aiming for Rank B. Veterans like us can’t continue taking a back seat to the young’uns like Kelvin and Efil, right?”

“Hmph, those words sure do seem to carry weight coming from someone with a wife and kids, Leader!”

The group who had arrived at Sangria Forest in this strangely excited state were the representative veterans of Parth: namely, the Rank C adventurer Uld and his party. Led by Uld, a tank, this was a very well-balanced party of macho men that also included a swordsman, an archer, and a mage. For some reason, even the archer and mage were incredibly muscular, but it didn’t matter; the party was still very well-balanced. If one was to state a single flaw, it would probably be the absence of the touch of a member of the fairer sex.

“According to Ange-chan, the boss of this place has already been defeated by Kelvin and his party. In other words, the spawn rate of monsters in this dungeon should be quite low, making it the perfect training ground for us!”

“Leader, we’re aiming to overcome Kelvin, right? But are we not riding on his coattails right now?”

“And what’s wrong with that?! As adventurers, our first priority should always be oursel— Stay sharp, we’ve got company!”

Uld glared at the two monsters who had been roaming around the forest. It was a Blood Mushroom — a Rank B plant-type monster — and a Skull Honeybee, also of the same rank.

You guys ready?

Yes, Leader!

Yes, Leader!

Yes, Leader!

After quickly exchanging confirmations by way of eye contact, the four men scattered to adopt the positions best suited to their respective roles. Just as they finished moving —

“Hmph!”

“Double Fireball!”

Without delay, out flew pre-emptive attacks in the form of an arrow and two balls of fire. As the easier one to aim, the arrow was shot at the knee-high Blood Mushroom. The double fireballs chanted by the mage homed in on the small Skull Honeybee.

The arrow successfully found its target, but the Skull Honeybee managed to deftly evade both fireballs thanks to the detection skill it possessed.

“Sorry! I missed the bug!”

“Not a problem! I’ll handle it!”

“Then I’ll take the monster mushroo— Oohhh?!”

At the same time that Uld closed in on the Skull Honeybee, the swordsman who was just about to slash at the Blood Mushroom found his legs giving way. Poison was the only explanation. Although Blood Mushrooms moved slowly, they had the ability to release poisonous spores that slowly dealt HP damage and inflicted paralysis every time they received physical damage. The microscopic spores were almost impossible to notice and would remain hanging in the air, just waiting to surprise unsuspecting victims.

“Tch! I’ll deal with the bee myself, so you two, back him up!”

“Yes, Leader!”

“Yes, Leader!”

Even as he barked out orders, Uld unleashed a powerful swing with his weapon. However, it did not even come close to scratching the dexterous Skull

Honeybee. In return, the monster shot a poisonous stinger out like a missile, which plunged deep into Uld's skin.

Shit! This one uses poison too?! Dammit, these potions aren't cheap!

Uld quickly pulled out one of the quick-acting antidote potions on his belt and downed it, then glared at his opponent. They had taken only one step into the dungeon, and this was only their first battle on the path to attaining Rank B.

One hour later:

"We finally killed them..."

"Haah...you guys all right?"

"I'm dead!"

"I'm dead!"

"I'll take that as a 'yes' then."

After the fierce exchange was over, Uld and the rest had promptly retreated and collapsed onto the open meadow in front of the dungeon. Although they had indeed clinched a victory, this single encounter had greatly exhausted them, not only in the physical sense but also in terms of the consumables that they had used up. The six HP potions, two MP potions, five antidotes, and various other items that they had burned through were by no means free.

"According to what I heard, Efil-chan can kill several of those creatures all by herself. Furthermore, she only needs one arrow for each of them."

"Ahh, I heard that too. If that practice session she had at the guild once was anything to go by, the monsters she kills probably don't even know why they died. She has incredible range, too."

The four men all sighed in unison.

"Even though she has such a cute face..."

"I guess the era for muscles really is over, isn't it?"

"No, we're just too green still. We have to take a page out of Gerard-dono's book!"

It was going to be quite some time before Uld and his comrades finally

became Rank B adventurers.

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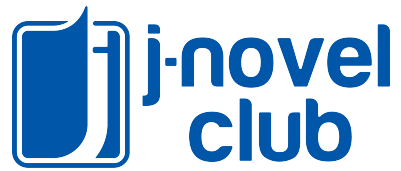
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Black Summoner: Volume 1

by Doufu Mayoi

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Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by OVERLAP, Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2020